

“The One Who Speaks and Shows”

Revelation 1:1-20

August 31, 2008

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Text Comment

v.2 John will tell us in this book what *he saw*. He was given visions and he reports to his readers the content of those visions. Wordsworth once defined poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” Well, says one commentator, Revelation is a vision recollected in tranquility. [Caird, 13] The vision is reported through the medium of literary and theological art. Revelation is a literary masterpiece of theological reflection on a vision all, of course, produced under the controlling influence of the Holy Spirit.

v.4 There were more than seven churches in the province of Asia. We know from the NT of churches at Troas, Colosse, and Hierapolis and from early Christian materials of still others. John’s limiting himself to seven churches therefore is intentional, a way of indicating that, no matter the specific and individual circumstances he will address in the seven letters, he is addressing the whole church, the church at large.

In the same way, the “seven spirits” is simply a way of referring to the Holy Spirit in “the fullness of his activity and power.” [Caird, 15] You’ll note that next time the Holy Spirit is mentioned, John uses the singular (v. 10). It is an explicitly Trinitarian salutation that John is here giving and naturally we expect to find reference to the Father, “the one who is, and who was, and who is to come,” reference to the Son, “and from Jesus Christ,” and reference to the Holy Spirit, “the seven spirits.” Think of the seven spirits as the fullness of God’s power sent out into the earth, as we will read in 5:6. [Bauckham, 109]

To say that God is, was, and will be is not only to confess God’s eternity but to say that he is Lord of the past, present, and future, the fundamental declaration of the entire book.

v.6 This is the first of a great many instances in which John applies to the church of his time, the church of the new epoch, the Old Testament descriptions of Israel. It is in Exodus 19 that we first read of Israel being a kingdom of priests to God. The Christian church, Jew and Gentile alike, *is* the true Israel, the people of God.

v.7 As we said last time, we will find Revelation thoroughly saturated with references and allusions to the OT Scripture. Verse 7 is a conflation of texts from Daniel and Zechariah, a combination that also appears in the Lord’s discourse about the end of the age in Matt. 24:30. So John was not the first to put those two texts together and make of them a single statement. At any rate, again fundamental to the teaching of the book, the present situation is rightly understood only when the future consummation is kept in view: the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. You do not understand a thing about your life, about your circumstances, about your problems, about your calling, about your obligations as a

Christian – you don't understand a thing if you are not thinking all the time in respect to those things of the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the end of history.

- v.8 The salutation of the letter is concluded with another assertion of God's absolute sovereignty. By the way, v. 8 and 21:5-8 near the end of the book contain the only direct speech of God in the book of Revelation.
- v.9 Now in the remainder of the opening section of his letter John identifies himself and his circumstances, the vision of Christ that he saw, and the instructions he received that resulted in his writing his letter.

You'll notice the great themes of the letter identified here: the suffering of believers, God's kingdom or divine rule, and the patient endurance to which Christians are called as followers of Jesus. In the Gospel of John (16:33) we read both, "In this world you will have tribulation" and "but "take heart for I have overcome the world." That verse in John 16 might well serve as a title for the book of Revelation.

John had been banished to Patmos as what we would nowadays call a political prisoner. The Christian faith was widely thought by Romans to be inherently seditious because it refused all practice of Roman religion which was intimately tied to the state and to the political life of the Roman world and because Christians refused to honor the emperor as Lord.

- v.10 This is the earliest extant reference to Sunday as "the Lord's Day," which is, as you may remember, one of the OT terms for the Sabbath day. Ignatius, early in the 2nd century, not many years after the writing of Revelation, says that the Christian church "ceased to keep the Sabbath and lived by the Lord's Day." Both are biblical terms for the Sabbath, but the point is that the holy day had been moved from Saturday to Sunday in recognition and celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the Sabbath was originally the memorial of the first creation, the Lord's Day became the memorial of the new creation in Christ. The Jewish rabbis of the period bear their own witness to how extensive and how universal was this practice when they referred to Sunday as "the day of the Christians."

"In the Spirit" means under the power of the Spirit, perhaps in some trance so that he might receive and perceive the vision God was giving him. If you remember, Peter at Joppa in Acts 10 and Paul, as he writes in 2 Cor. 12, had similar experiences.

- v.11 The result of John's obedience to these instructions is the book of Revelation!
- v.12 The seven lampstands, as we will learn in v. 20, represent the seven churches to which John writes. The background of this image is, of course, the seven branched candelabra that was in the temple and then Zechariah's use of the lampstand as a figure for the people of God. [Beale, 206] The church bears the light to the world, another theme of the book.

- v.13 This majestic figure is “among the lampstands.” Jesus Christ is not some absentee landlord, having withdrawn from the world at his ascension and not to return until his Second Coming. He is present with his people.

The robe and sash are part of the uniform of the high priest.

- v.16 All of these descriptions as you know have their origin in OT Scripture particularly in the books of Daniel and Ezekiel, but one commentator wisely cautions us against “unweaving the rainbow.” [Caird, 25] John is after the total effect, not a catalog of descriptions; he is not giving us clues to unravel one by one. Remember, this text would have been read to and heard by the Christians of those seven churches. The reader wouldn’t have stopped and discussed the meaning of each word, they would have gotten the impression, they would have immediately realized the OT background and they would have understood that John was describing a figure of sublime majesty and absolute authority; a person who makes the Roman emperor, for example, look like a helpless little child in comparison.

The fact that he holds the seven stars in his hand – another way of speaking of the seven churches as we read in v. 20 – indicates his care of the churches. He has them in his hand.

- v.17 We remember that the last time John and the Lord are put together in the biblical narrative, John laid his head on the Lord’s chest at the Last Supper. Now Christ is revealed in his divine glory and the sight of him completely overwhelms John. Something to remember, you and I, we will never see the Lord Jesus Christ as he was seen during the days of his ministry here in this world. In those days his glory was hidden, it was the time of his humiliation. We will only and ever see him as the Son of God and with the glory of God upon him.
- v.18 Believers may face the prospect of death unafraid because their Savior and Lord has conquered death and has the authority to unlock the gates and set them free.
- v.19 The entire revelation that John receives concerns the past, present, and future. It concerns the history of man and of every individual human being. We live in the present on the strength of what we know God has done in the past in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and what he will do in the future at the Lord’s Second Coming and in the confidence that he is present with us now amongst the lampstands.
- v.20 These “angels” of the seven churches pose a notorious difficulty of interpretation. Are the angels the earthly ministers of those churches, their pastors? Some have said so, but there is no other usage of the term to support that interpretation. Are they the churches’ guardian angels as if there is an angel in heaven for every single congregation of Christian people? Again that is an interpretation without a precedent though it is certainly possible. The most widely supported interpretation in modern biblical and believing scholarship is that the stars represent the church’s heavenly existence (hence the Lord holding them in his hand in v. 16) – whether or not “stars” refers to actual angels – while the lampstands represent the church’s earthly existence. The angels are, therefore, a

personification of the church. One argument in favor of this interpretation is that after the address to the angel the letter itself is addressed to the church, to the congregation.

There is an obvious sense in which chapter 1 of Revelation is all introduction. We are introduced to John; at least in general to the seven churches to which he will write his account of his vision; we read of his summons to write to the those churches; and finally we are given an account of the beginnings of that vision he saw, the account of which vision will fill the remainder of the book. We have his report of the heavenly figure that he saw, the risen Jesus Christ in his glory as the Son of God, and of what Jesus said to him. But we do not yet know what John is going to be told about what is happening “now” and “what will soon take place” which, as we read in v. 19, is the subject of what follows: the present and the future. All of what we find in chapter 1 may fairly be taken as an introduction to the book.

But that is true in another way as well. What we have in the opening chapter may also be taken as the entire book in a summary form. I could demonstrate this to you in detail but it would weary you and take too long. But the literary and theological connections between chapter one and what follows are extensive and obviously intentional. John himself apparently saw this opening section as a compressed form of the entire letter. What is soon to take place? Well, we have already mentioned in chapter one both the suffering of the church and the second coming of the Lord Jesus. What is happening at this moment? Well, the Lord is standing among the lampstands. Jesus is with his people and exercising his dominion as the ruler over the kings of the earth on behalf of his church. And what will be the calling of God’s people? Well it will be, so we read in v. 9, patient endurance and suffering on behalf of Jesus Christ – the sort of affliction that John suffered by being exiled to Patmos *on account of his Christian ministry* –; it will be bearing the light of Christ to the world – as the identification of the church with a lampstand indicates – and it will be waiting for the consolation of Israel, the consummation of history at the Lord’s return. And who is it to whom we are to look and in whom we are to trust and whose kingdom we are to serve meantime? It is the Lord Christ himself.

You may have noticed that the self-description of God in v. 8 of chapter one is substantially repeated in Christ’s self-description in v. 17. God the Father described himself as the Alpha and Omega, which is the same thing as Jesus saying of himself that he is the first and the last. As you know alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. God said of himself that he is the one who is, who was, and who is to come, which is very like Jesus saying of himself that he is the Living One and that he is alive forever. This person who stands before John in his vision, this one who died and then rose again, is here revealed to us both as Almighty God and as the ruler of the kings of the earth. We are going to find in Revelation what biblical scholars call a “high Christology,” that is, a view of Christ Jesus that particularly emphasizes his full equality with the Father as God. What is more he has the stars in his hand, which is to say he has you and me and his entire church in his hand. *All of that is the book of Revelation in sum, its message compressed into its introduction.*

But all of that as well tells us what Revelation is going to be as a summons, as a calling, as a message addressed to you and me. It is from first to last a call to faith and to the exercise of faith in the world in which we live and in the time in which we live. What is the great difficulty in being a Christian? Have you thought about this; what is the thing that makes being a Christian

most difficult, especially being a faithful Christian? Some might say that it is the hard work of obedience. God requires of us obedience to many commandments that are difficult to obey. It is hard to be pure, it is hard to be loving, it is very hard to be humble. It is very hard to put the interests of others above our own. Dragging our hearts to obey the Lord is hard work which is why so few do it really well. God asks us to deny desires that are very natural to us and very powerful within us; his commandments require concentrated effort and the determination of will when sin and disobedience come so naturally and easily to us. But hard as obedience is; it isn't the real difficulty of the Christian life. The difficulty of obedience would disappear to a great degree if it were not for another still greater difficulty. And that difficulty is that *Christians must live by faith*.

What an extraordinary difference it makes *to be able see* the things we are ordinarily required *to believe*. John saw the Lord Christ in his glory and the sight shattered and overwhelmed him. We believe that the glory of the Lord Christ is overwhelming, but that is hardly the same thing as actually being overwhelmed by that glory! John I expect never thought about this world or his life in this world the same way again after having seen the Lord with the majesty of God upon him and holding the seven stars in his right hand. John was given by the Holy Spirit *to see* things that you and I must *believe*.

Froujke Boyle told me the other day of a dream that she had one of her first nights in the Franciscan Hospice House where she now is staying. There was a river before her – she realized somehow it was an image of her death – but the river was neither wide nor deep. What is more, a hand was stretched out to take hers and it helped her jump right over the river. Now that is a wonderful thing to see in one's sleep and all the more when one is dying. Wouldn't it be splendid if all of our dreams were of that kind! If we could see *our* death and still much more our life in such an encouraging, meaningful, vivid and visual way!

But John didn't have a dream that some modern psychoanalyst would explain either as the projection of his desires or his fears or simply as an effect of his indigestion. John was in the Holy Spirit on the Lord's Day. God himself *showed him* something and *said* something to him in a voice that he could hear. He was given to see the Lord Christ in his exalted glory and he was shattered by the experience of being face to face with the Almighty and found himself on his face. If he had ever been tempted to exaggerate the vaunted power of Rome, he never made that mistake again. Every time he heard someone speak of Rome's sovereign power he would chuckle to himself and remember what he saw and what he felt and what happened to him when he saw the ruler of the kings of the earth. Whenever he witnessed evil seeming to triumph in this world, whenever he saw the church suffering for her faith, he would catch himself and remember whom he saw standing among the lampstands and holding the seven stars in his hand. That one sight of Christ in his divine glory with a sharp double-edged sword coming out of his mouth was enough utterly to transform forever his conception of reality. What happened in this world, what happened in any individual life, he now could not doubt, was the will of this mighty figure whose royalty and sovereignty and mighty power far transcended anything known to this world, this figure he had *seen*!

But, of course, you and I haven't had John's experience. Or Paul's who was taken up in a vision to heaven and given to see things so surpassingly wonderful that he wasn't allowed to try to

describe them to others. No wonder Paul faced his afflictions with such aplomb; no wonder he was unafraid of death. No wonder he found it so easy to say that death was better by far than life. He had in a vision been to the other side and couldn't wait to get back there. He had seen that world that ordinarily men and women must simply believe. What is more, on the Damascus road he had met the risen Christ and seen him in his heavenly glory. He knew the reality of resurrection. It was impossible for him to have doubts about who ruled this world and that there was another world to come.

But we have not enjoyed these high privileges. We've never seen the Lord high and lifted up. We've never heard the voice that sounds like rushing waters. What we can see, what we have seen is often quite different. We see the suffering of the church, we see the ineffectuality of many Christian lives, we see believers struggling to believe that the gospel really works, that God's power can be experienced in their lives when they pray, that his promises are all "yea and amen." We see a world that lives in utter indifference to its maker, its great men often denying outright that the world even has a maker. We see more unbelief than faith, more wickedness than goodness, and we don't see the world heading obviously and inexorably to the consummation of history at the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. We hear, as we did last week, of two dear Christian parents in Pakistan whose Christian children were stolen from them by extended family members who are Muslims and, when a judge then awarded the children to the kidnappers – who claimed that the children had converted to Islam – the parents were not even allowed to speak with their children. We *know* that what John has described to us is true. We know that Christ is among the lampstands. We know that he has the stars in his hand. We know this is the actual reality of things. But we have to hold very tight to that reality because, unable to see it, forced every day to see a world that does not immediately appear to be as John describes it, that reality is always almost near to slipping from our grasp.

People often speak of faith as if it were an easy thing, even the easiest thing in the world. "All you have to do is believe," they say. But of all things in this world faith, real faith, genuine faith, is the most difficult. In fact, the Bible says it is actually impossible for man to exercise true faith; it is too hard for him. That is why it is and must be the gift of God.

Do you remember Gehazi, Elisha's servant? Do you remember how terrified he was, as we read in 2 Kings 6, because he and his master were in Dothan and he awoke one morning to find that the city was surrounded by the Syrian army intent on capturing Elisha and if they got Elisha they would get Gehazi too? Do you remember how Elisha prayed that the Lord might open his servant's eyes and that when God answered that prayer Gehazi looked and saw the hills surrounding the town full of horses and chariots of fire. The angels of God were there to protect them. The Syrian army notwithstanding, he had nothing to fear. And so it proved. They walked out of Dothan and no one laid a hand on them. But Gehazi *saw*; we do not see. That is the brute fact of our lives. We must believe what we cannot see.

There is a scene in a Woody Allen movie in which Woody's character and his date find themselves in line at a movie theater. Ahead of them a man is talking pompously to his date about the philosophy of Marshall McLuhan obviously hoping to impress her with his knowledge. Woody gets increasingly agitated and finally interrupts the conversation in front of him and says, "You don't know what you're talking about." The man replies, "What do you mean? I teach

philosophy at NYU; I'm a specialist in the philosophy of Marshall McLuhan." "Come over here," says Woody and the two walk over to a man standing by himself in the theater lobby. It turns out the man *is* Marshall McLuhan. "Does this man understand your thought," Woody asks? "This fellow doesn't have the foggiest idea about what I am trying to say," replies McLuhan. Then Woody turns to the camera and says, "Don't you wish this happened in real life?"

Well, we can easily feel and think the same thing about Gehazi's experience or Paul's or John's. Don't you wish the same thing happened in real life, which is to say, in *your life* and in *my life*? How different our lives would be if just once we could *see* as these favored men saw. See the reality that is otherwise hidden from sight and must be believed. The reality which if true utterly transforms the meaning of everything in our lives.

I go the gym three times a week nowadays and almost never fail to think about the people I see there, mostly young people but not all by any means. I wonder what their lives are like. I wonder what they are thinking about God and themselves and the future; if they are thinking anything at all. I wonder if they have the glimmer of an idea that reality is not at all what it appears to be. There are TV screens everywhere in the gym, so that people can watch CNN or a sports channel as they exercise. The TV talking heads chattering on about politics or football, the folk on the treadmill listening and watching. Are any of them even dimly aware of the Majesty that stands among the lampstands and holds the seven stars in his hands? Do they think of their lives at all in terms of the catastrophe and the wonder that will come upon the world of men when Jesus returns?

Among the reefs and inlets of life, Tertullian said, the soul is safe only if "faith, her sails filled by the Spirit of God, navigates" the way. But it is no easy thing to keep faith's hand upon the wheel of our lives, is it? John has given us the record of what *he saw* so that we, who cannot see, can be the more sure of what is real. Thomas said he would not believe unless he *saw* and *touched* the risen Christ. When he saw him, Jesus said to him – and his words amounted to a rebuke – "you believed because you saw, blessed are those who believe but do not *see*."

There are so many good reasons to be convinced of our Christian faith and the teaching of Holy Scripture. The longer I live, the longer I experience this world, the more I think about human life and experience, the more I study the Bible, the more I compare the teaching of the Bible to the observation of human life, the more sure I become of the truth of all of it. But I accept that believing what cannot be seen remains the hardest work in all the world. It is the difficulty of faith that explains the vision John was given and the report of which he has recorded for us in this wonderful book. It is to encourage us who must believe and who cannot see that at least a few good men were given to see and then told to tell us what they saw!