

Revelation 20: The Death of Death

Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Well it's just two months before Big Brother series 6 comes to a TV screen near you! Once more a group of complete strangers will be shoved together in a small house, filmed for 24 hours a day and given all sorts of ridiculous tasks to perform in the hope that this will produce an hour's watchable television a day for a few weeks. Since the first series of Channel 4s BB show in the year 2000 "reality TV" has taken off in a serious way.

And the TV makers' obsession with this format is by no means coming to an end. Coming soon on ITV is "*Celebrity Wrestling!*" In which ex-Big Brother contestant Jade Goody's ex-boyfriend, a Page Three model and some slightly less famous people fight inside a metal cage. ITV has promised "Wrestling as it's never been seen before!" And just when you thought it couldn't get any worse next up ITV has promised "*Celebrity Shark Bait.*"

Predictably things have gone even further across the Atlantic. In the US some enterprising film producer made a programme where homeless men were filmed fighting and setting each other's hair on fire in return for cigarettes, food, drink, and small amounts of money.

The film sold hundreds of thousands of copies and rights for a sequel were bought by a Las Vegas company for \$1.5 million.

The problem with "reality TV" of course is that it bears almost no resemblance to reality! And the more of it we watch the more we can see how heavily staged and edited it is.

If we stop to think about it for just a minute we know that the colourful, visual world of Reality TV is actually nothing more than a shimmering illusion.

And lots of people think of the book of Revelation in much the same way...as a fanciful story – the apostle John's colourful reconstruction of a world and especially of the end of a world that bears no resemblance to reality.

For many people Christian talk of heaven and hell – of places where people live for eternity, either in the very presence of God's perfect blessings, or forever experiencing his terrifying judgments – is no different to believing in fairies in the garden, looking in crystal balls or reading your horoscopes.

It's all just nonsense with, some would say, a sinister agenda of power and control lying behind it.

The apostle John saw this vision that we call the book of Revelation and he was commanded by Jesus Christ to write it down for our benefit. And he was not it seems to me, a man given to nonsense. We know he was a fisherman by trade – the kind of man who spent his daily life dealing with objective realities of wind, waves, tide, nets and catches. He was not some philosopher who spent his days sitting and thinking about nothing in particular. He was a man who had spent his life firmly grounded in the real world.

And the vision that's described to us in these verses is not some sort of escapist fantasy. Quite the opposite. This vision is an insight into the world that lies behind that which we can see and taste and touch. In this vision John lifts the curtain on reality and shows us the inner workings of the universe.

He describes it using language which is full of images, some of which seem quite odd to us. But the world we see in this chapter is no less real than the chairs you are sitting on this morning.

This passage stands for us as a reality check to remind us what is **really** happening in our own universe.

And we are told four vital truths that we must remember if we are to understand the world as it really is:

Reality check 1: Satan is bound (v1-3)

This vision describes the limitation of the power of God's greatest enemy – the devil or Satan.

He is bound with a great chain and thrown into a bottomless hole for 1,000 years; a great act of God which prevents him from deceiving the nations.

What people argue about is the relationship is between this binding of Satan (sometimes called the millennium), our experience of living in this world and the return of Jesus Christ from heaven.

Essentially there are three views:

View 1 is called **premillennialism**. It's called that because these people think that Jesus will return before this binding of Satan. The reason they think that is that the return of Jesus has just been described in Revelation 19 and that because Revelation 20 follows Revelation 19 in the Bible it must follow it in history too.

View 2 is called **postmillennialism**. It's called that because these folk believe that there will be a period of time when God's message, the good news of about Jesus, triumphs and the church grows and grows in a very spectacular way and there is very little persecution of Christians and that it will basically get better and better until just before Jesus returns. In other words Jesus returns after, post the millennium.

The third view, and the one I think is right, for lots of reasons I'm not going to go into now, is called **amillennialism**. Amillennialism says is that the time when Satan is bound and his power is restricted is the whole time between Jesus' first coming (his cross and resurrection) and his second coming. In other words the millennium is NOW.

Satan, the serpent, the dragon, the great enemy of God and his people is even now restricted and limited. He is not yet dead but he is bound.

But, you might be thinking, doesn't the Bible say that the devil is prowling round like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour? Doesn't the Bible warn us that we need to stand firm and arm ourselves against his spiritual assaults?

Yes indeed. But Revelation 20 doesn't tell us that the devil's power is taken away from him in all respects.

Look at v3. The angel throws him into the abyss and seals it over. Why? *"To keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended."*

And that's true now. Before Jesus came the nations of the world were trapped under the rule of the evil one.

It is only with the coming of Jesus that the good news of God's rescue from sin and death can go out to all the world.

There is nothing that Satan can do to prevent people from every single nation under heaven coming to be rescued by putting their trust in Jesus.

This morning it does not matter what country you come from. Not even the devil can stop you from becoming a follower of Jesus if you put your trust in his death on the cross.

And if you are a Christian here this morning you should be encouraged. Because as we share the good news about Jesus with all sorts of people we can expect it to have an effect. We can expect the message of Jesus to bring people to trust him. We can expect it to bring people to eternal life with him.

I think I'm right in saying that on or around our most recent Christianity Explored course 5 people have made a commitment to trust and follow Jesus. That shouldn't surprise us. It shouldn't surprise us when people reject the message of Jesus – hearts are hard and Satan is active. And it shouldn't surprise us when people believe it either – Jesus is Lord and Satan is bound.

But perhaps even more shocking than the fact that at present the Devil is restricted in his power is the astonishing truth that, right now, God's people reign.

Reality check 2: God's people reign (v4-6)

It's not just that Satan's power has been restricted so that people of all nations can come and worship Jesus. Actually those people who worship Jesus – Christians – are never defeated; even by the worst their enemy can throw at them.

Even though Satan's power still means that some Christians are martyred; killed for their refusal to adopt the standards of Satan's world, he has no final power over them.

God's people, v4, reign with Christ for 1,000 years – throughout all of history from the cross to Jesus' return.

Who rules the world? Well it may look like it's presidents and media barons and oil company executives and computer software moguls. But behind the curtain, in ultimate reality, God's people rule the world with Christ.

He is the king and, if you are a Christian here this morning, you are with him. Sure his rule and his reign is often hidden.

Sometimes it's nearly invisible. His kingdom starts as small as a mustard seed. It's like a growing plant where for ages and ages nothing appears to be happening. But he is still the king – and his people reign with him.

This, John tells us, v5, is the first resurrection. The first resurrection is what happens to anyone the moment they become a Christian.

- When you put your trust in Jesus you are instantly transferred from being under God's judgment to being one of his people.
- When you put your trust in Jesus you are instantly transferred from being in darkness to being in light.
- When you put your trust in Jesus you are instantly transferred from being dead to being alive.

If you are a Christian here this morning you have had a resurrection. You have been brought to new life by Jesus and there is a sense in which you are now reigning with him.

If you are not a Christian here this morning that experience is available to you simply by turning away from your rejection of God's rule and putting your trust in Jesus.

And the fact that Christ rules and we rule with him has all sorts of implications.

One of the most important is that if you are a Christian you don't need to earn the right to share the good news about Jesus with anyone. Sometimes you hear Christians talk as if we can't tell people about Jesus if we haven't first developed a meaningful relationship with them or given them money or helped them in some other way. Now of course it's great for Christians to help as many people as we can in as many ways as we can. And people are never projects for us to practice our techniques explaining who Jesus is on. They are always people, to be loved and cared for and valued.

But we don't have to earn the right to tell people about Jesus. Because he is the king. And he asks his people to reign with him – to declare the kingship of Jesus to the whole world. Jesus has given you all the authority that you need to tell people about him.

That's what we need to know about the world as it is now. But John also wants us to know what is going to happen at the end of time. And the good news is that...

Reality check 3: Satan will be destroyed (v7-10)

One of the phrases that some people use to criticise other people who interpret this passage differently from them is that they don't take the passage "literally". Of course

no one takes this passage, or any other in Revelation, entirely literally. I've never met anyone who thinks Satan will actually be tied up with a big metal chain – how do you bind a spirit?

In fact being excessively literal; failing to see Bible images as just that; images; can produce ridiculous results. Let me give you an example. One famous "scientific" paper that tried to show that heaven is hotter than hell. The argument ran like this:

Isaiah 30:26 reads: *The moon will shine like the sun and the light of the sun will be seven times brighter.*

Using the Stefan-Boltzmann fourth power law for the amount of radiation given off by the earth we can multiply the current figures and work out the temperature of heaven, as 525°C.

The exact temperature of hell must be less than 444.6°C, the temperature at which sulphur changes from a liquid to a gas because there is a lake of burning sulphur in Revelation 20:10.

Therefore heaven is hotter than hell.

If fact someone else has written another paper arguing that hell is actually hotter than heaven – but if you want to know about that come and ask me afterwards!

Clearly this is all complete rubbish.

The writer of Revelation 20 wasn't trying to tell us anything about the temperature of hell when he wrote this; any more than he thought that the earth had 4 corners, or that Satan would actually ascend from a prison or that God's people would all be camping in the same place at the time!

What he is saying is that before Jesus returns, and probably only just before Jesus returns, there will be some particular outbreak of evil and rebellion against God.

We don't know what this will look like. But I don't think anybody will be able to mistake it when it comes. It may happen next week. Or it may not happen for another 1,000 years.

But whenever it is Christians don't need to be worried by it.

Because although this rebellion targets God's people it won't hurt them. God's victory will be instant and total:

"fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was

thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever."

Did you notice how the devil gets men and women to follow him? He deceives them. From the very beginning of time right up till the last battle Satan tries to convince people that if they side with him they can overthrow God.

In our society he does it by telling people that if they give themselves to naturalistic science they can disprove the existence of God. Or that if they adopt the creeds of postmodernism they can declare that there is no such thing as truth and thus remove any need for God from their view of the world.

If you are not a Christian here this morning you need to know that the reality of the universe is that God and his son Jesus will stand in victory over all the other powers in the world on the last day.

And on that day...

Reality check 4: Only being in the book of life will save you (v11-15)

When God comes to judge the living and the dead the surveillance of Big Brother will seem like nothing.

In the books of God's judgment are, v12, the deeds of every person in human history. Every action, word, thought and attitude recorded with perfect and judicial accuracy by the one who sees everything.

None will escape this final tribunal – v13 – even those lost in the deepest ocean depths will be reclaimed to stand before God's seat of judgment. No-one, v12, will be too great to be judged; and no one will be too insignificant to slip through the net.

Can I say that if you are here this morning and you are not a Christian, if you do not trust in Jesus Christ, you should be very frightened today.

Not because I am trying to scare you. I'm not. And I don't like talking about these things because many members of my own family about whom I care deeply are not Christians.

But the reality is that God's judgment is coming. And that it is by the decisions we make in this life that we will be judged. And

many, many people will share with Satan the fate of being cast into the lake of fire.

That is reality. This is not some slick TV show with an agenda to twist the facts to suit. This is what God himself, who made us and who loves us, says humanity faces.

And I am sure that each person here knows that, judged by what we have done, none of us will escape God's just punishment that goes on for ever and ever.

Hell is a horrible thought – because it's a horrible place. A terrible place of shame and suffering and darkness and destruction and agony.

But that does not make it any less real.

There is only one way to escape eternity without God. Only one way to avoid his terrible and entirely deserved judgment. And that, v15, is to have your name written in the book of life.

If you've read the rest of Revelation you'll have found this book before – it comes in chapter 3 and chapter 13.

And it is a book in which is written the names of all who put their hope in Jesus Christ. Every person who recognises that on the basis of what we have done we deserve to go to hell and has asked Jesus to be their Saviour and their Lord.

You don't have to do anything to get your name in the book of life – just tell God you are sorry and put your trust in Jesus forever.

If you are not a Christian here this morning will you do that? Will you recognise the reality of your situation and do something about it so that you do not face God's judgment at the end of time?

But if you are a Christian here today then you must rejoice. Because for all who trust in Jesus your eternity will be spent in a spotless, perfect world, with God at its centre, just as he has planned since before worlds began.

That is no shimmering illusion – that is reality.

And if you want to know more about that place you'll have to come back next week.

*Andrew Evans
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