

TUESDAY 19TH DECEMBER

Read: Revelation 17

'The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication [...] The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.' **Revelation 17:4,18**

Why do so few people (in the West) follow Jesus? Before reading on think how you would answer. Today we start a new section of Revelation focusing on the symbol of Babylon. We are going to reflect on three things. First, Babylon is alluring. John is shown a vision of a femme fatale, beautifully and opulently dressed. She is an enthralling prostitute who intoxicates kings and nations. Contrast Babylon with the woman we met in chapter 12. She is the symbol of the anti-church, the world in opposition to God. Drawing on the Old Testament, Babylon's sex appeal is idolatry, i.e. spiritual unfaithfulness to the true and living God. She is so alluring because we are all tempted to idolise good things (money, comfort, pleasure, family, etc) and put them in God's place. She offers the blessings of God but without Him.

Second, Babylon is oppressive. She rides this seven-headed, ten-horned beast reminiscent of the dragon and the sea beast. The beast is clearly satanic and apes God's power and authority. She exercises satanic power both in domineering over peoples and nations and in murdering Jesus' followers. The angel tells us Babylon is the great city of man, like its namesake Babel (Genesis 11). It stands in sharp contrast with the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God in chapter 21. First-to-fourth century Rome fulfils this picture of Babylon well but does not exhaust it. Babylon, I think, is best seen as a recurring pattern in human affairs of power and authority wielded repressively especially against Jesus' people. Here our thoughts may rightly spring to persecuted Christians today. Yet we also live in Babylon. In the West, her allure is much more to the fore but the threats against conformity, though milder, are real: mocking, exclusion, silencing, sacking etc.

However, Babylon will not continue forever, because third, Babylon will be judged. The reason John is given this vision is so that, despite the scale of opposition, we see that Jesus wins and therefore so do His faithful people. The Lamb will conquer... and those with Him are called and chosen and faithful (v.17). When Jesus calls us to self-sacrificial love we aren't missing out. In Jesus are all the blessings of God and their right enjoyment. When we own up to being Christians and take flack for it, it's a sign we're on the right side not the wrong one. We are the Church pledged to Christ. The heavenly Jerusalem is our true home. So resist the idolatrous promises of easy pleasure, power, and protection without fear. Jesus wins and so will we.

The Revd Jonny Lee, Vicar of All Hallows, Bispham.