

# **"I am...coming soon"**

**Back to Church Sunday – 26<sup>th</sup> September 2010**

**Karen Senior**

## **Readings:**

Revelation 22: 7 – 21

Psalm 103: 1 – 5

John 1: 35 - 42

When people are totally caught up in a really good story, they desperately want to know how it's all going to finish. Before the publication of the 7<sup>th</sup> and final Harry Potter book, JK Rowling had revealed that some characters wouldn't survive but who would meet their end and indeed who would eventually marry who, was a successfully kept secret until the book went on sale.

Back in July 2007, when that final Harry Potter book was published more than a quarter of a million fans showed up to buy their book just from the Waterstones stores across the country which opened specially at midnight. Asda and WHS reported similar numbers of buyers ... and I wonder how many of them went home and opened the book, not at the beginning, but at the end, to see how it all finished up?

The reading Alastair read is the Bible's final passage ... so we could well wonder if the same principle applied ... turn to the back, read the last bit, see who wins, is there a wedding? ... and know the ending ...

Listening to Alastair reading the passage probably made you realise it isn't quite that clear – no reflection on how it was read, but it comes over as something of a collection of ideas which don't have a clear 21<sup>st</sup> century end of story structure.

But there is a promise printed 3 times in the 14 verses – and Brian has used it as the title for the service today. It might indeed be "Back to Church Sunday" but "I am coming soon" isn't the recommended reply for people whose friends invited them here this morning – they are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and the fact that they are repeated 3 times in this last bit of the Bible suggests to me that this is something we need to grasp.

Last weekend, after an early start to get Gareth to Gatwick by 8am, and our familiar trip to London to visit Josh in hospital, we sat down just before 10pm with dinner, and turned on the TV. We just caught the end of Michael McIntyre's show – and a young comedian – I don't know who he was – was asking if anyone in the audience was religious.

He said something along the lines of "I'm neither religious nor atheist – you make up your own theories, I've combined a bit of religion and a bit of atheism and come to the conclusion that God created the world then he ... went away ... he's left us a space to do our own thing and that's why there's war, corruption and greed but maybe God will come back one day and say "Look at the state of this place.""

And I wondered, if that was his conclusion – how many other people who wouldn't call themselves religious would believe that "God's coming back"? And by the way – in case you saw the show, and you are wondering now – I think the atheist component

to the theory was the idea that God has created the world and cleared off to leave us to it ... but we'll come back to that.

There's no question from the Bible that the story will end with Jesus coming back, and that his return to planet earth will be in serious contrast to his coming as a baby, born to a young mother who was away from home with nowhere to stay, in a middle eastern land under occupation by the most powerful regime of the day.

The Bible makes it very clear that Jesus will return, and is equally clear that the date won't be pre-announced, and that it will take most people by complete surprise. There is very little detail, so perhaps it isn't surprising that there has been whole subculture of Christianity, especially in America, trying to work out the detail.

There is even a Simpson's episode with an Apocalypse scene: Lisa says: "It's the rapture, and I never knew true love." While Homer regrets: "And I never used those pizza coupons ..."

This side of the Atlantic we are more likely to see dour faced individuals with sandwich boards telling us "the end is nigh".

But when the book of revelation was written, it was long before the Simpsons and the sandwich board – and we need to try and get at least some sort of feel for the way the first readers read it.

Brian mentioned last week that the Apostle John wrote the book of Revelation on the island of Patmos. Today Patmos is a sunshine holiday destination. But although John doesn't make it clear, other historical records from that era tell us that Patmos was the location of one of the Roman Empire's penal colonies. So John was probably there as a prisoner working in a quarry, perhaps breaking rocks – a tough sentence for an elderly man.

After Jesus ascended to heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit to empower his disciples, the good news about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus spread throughout the Roman Empire within about 30 years ... and there were Christians even in Rome itself. By the time John had his revelation on the island of Patmos, the church was facing intense persecution from Emperor Domitian, He really cranked up the tradition of Emperor worship to the point where everyone in the empire was expected to refer to him as "Lord and God", and he punished whoever tried to resist - politically, economically and with downright cruelty.

It was about this time that the church began to meet underground in the catacombs. The Catacombs were deep underground tunnels intended for the burial of the dead, so probably not the greatest venue for meeting to worship, but out of sight of the authorities, and those who might report their meeting to the authorities. As if all that weren't enough, the church faced internal problems too – poverty, heresy and disagreements ... does that sound familiar?

The revelation John wrote down, was a reminder to those early Christians that whatever the Romans said, Jesus *is* Lord, and will one day come to take his rightful place as Lord, and that despite the temptations to give up following Jesus, or to follow those who preach a less demanding Gospel, they should hang on in there, because Jesus would be back.

Anyone who has tried to read Revelation will know it is very different writing from the rest of the New Testament, with its locusts like horses, seven bowls of wrath, war in heaven, and even a dragon! To us it is all very strange and we wonder how we should understand it. One writer describes it as "God's gorgeous picture book for the church". We aren't meant to take it literally.

For the readers in a hostile Roman Empire, there might have been safety in the symbolism – so when John writes about "Babylon the great, the mother of harlots" he's actually referring to Rome and its power – but best the Romans don't realise that if they find the paperwork.

It's a bit like the prayer letters which Rod and Ruthie, who are known to some of us here, sent when things were getting difficult for them overseas – and they simply wrote "p" rather than "please pray for" ... because if their mail was opened and seen to be asking Christians to pray for them, they would have had to leave the country ... immediately!

The Bible begins with the Genesis account of creation ... and the story ends in Revelation with the New Creation – Chapters 21 and the first 5 verses of chapter 22 describe the New Jerusalem and the river of life ... and a whole new life without death or mourning or crying or pain.

So - in between Genesis and Revelation - has God created the world and cleared off? No way ... he created a wonderful world, but after people messed it up, God determined to put it right and promised Abraham (who at the time was an old bloke who'd never managed to have children) that his descendents would be God's own people and would bring blessing to all other people.

The history books of the Old Testament show Abraham's descendents, the people of Israel, – turning away from God, getting in a complete mess, realising and reluctantly coming back, then turning away again. They had good God fearing Kings, and totally bad corrupt kings ... and God sent prophets – his messengers – to tell them that they were way off track, but God still loved them and didn't want to give up on them.

Eventually God promised that one day he would send the ultimate King of Israel - his own Son - to restore their relationship with him. The Gospels are the record of what Jesus did – his life on earth, his teachings, his death and resurrection. After the Gospels we can read about the Acts of the Apostles ... and then the rest of the New Testament – up to Revelation, is about how Christians should live and how churches should be. If Revelation is the last chapter of the story, we are in the chapter before last and Jesus calls us to play our part in his story.

And God still hasn't cleared off – he promises his Holy Spirit to us to help us to follow Jesus and live for him.

I've had a full week (or four) and I didn't read the passages for today until part way through this week and at first reading I said to Brian ... "what on earth am I meant to do with the passage from Revelation – it's the random bits at the end?" I later discovered that there's a theological way of saying this ... I read it in a book! "John rounds off his book with a series of somewhat miscellaneous observations".

So if you want to study these random bits at the end verse by verse, You'll best do that later, at home ... but I want to highlight just a couple of things – as well as Jesus saying "I am coming soon".

This passage is a conversation. There is John, and there is Jesus, and there is also an angel, the messenger who has shown John what has happened in the chapters before ... and it isn't easy to work out who's saying what.

But the Angel is clear about who should be worshipped. John was so overwhelmed at these visions he had, he'd fallen at the feet of the angel and was reprimanded by the angel who said "don't worship me, I am a fellow servant of God with you - worship God"

There is an invitation too ... in verse 17 - The Spirit and the bride say "Come!" and let him who hears say "Come!" The Holy Spirit says "come!" The bride is the church - and the church says "Come." Come back Lord Jesus, but there is an invitation to us - Whoever is thirsty let him come and whoever wishes let him take the free gift of the water of life.

Back in the Gospel reading, also written by the apostle John, before he had his revelation, Rachel read us the account of Jesus calling his first disciples - and Jesus said to them "come".

Elsewhere In his Gospel, John describes himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." That doesn't mean that Jesus loved John and tolerated the other 11 ... Peter, James and John were the close friends, and the closest of them was John. It was John who Jesus asked to take care of his mother, as he died on the cross.

Perhaps you are here today because someone has said "come". But Jesus says "Come" to each and every one of us ... he welcomes us all, and he sees us as we are - and like his conversation with Peter he sees who we can become if we will follow him.

John knew that welcome when he first met Jesus, He spent 3 years following Jesus and seeing all sorts of unlikely folk being welcomed into Jesus' company and now, on Patmos Island, he looked forward with all his heart to Jesus returning soon.

And that word - soon - is one I find tricky - because in my head 2000 years isn't soon ... but I don't see time from the perspective of eternity ... and Jesus does, and he said "I am coming soon". We don't know when.

Meanwhile he also says to us "come" - and that invitation is open now and to everyone. You might have been invited "back to church", and wonder is that an unavoidable part of the deal ... can I come to Jesus and forget the church bit?

Jesus simply says "come". But he also calls us to take our part in the next to the last chapter of his story ... the story of his church in the world, and he never intended us to do that as solo workers, but as part of a team.

The team here aren't perfect, but I know that over the last 4 weeks since our lives were turned upside down when Josh had his accident, we have valued all sorts of practical help from so many people here, but we have also valued spiritual support ... and on the days when I was in too much shock, or emotional pain, or exhaustion to pray - knowing that others were praying for me has been more important to me than I could ever have imagined.

So come - come to Jesus who invites us all and welcome back to church.