

Rappahannock Christian Church – 11/7/10

Dr. Kenneth Wilbur

Communion Meditation

This being the Sunday before Veterans Day, I think it is only fitting that we will be reading Revelation 17, which speaks of a great battle. This reminds me that the Christian life is a struggle every single day. It is not an external one that is won by arrows and guns. It is internal. Paul says in Romans 7 that he can't seem to win the war going on between the good that his mind tells him he should be doing and that old sinful nature which is still at work in his life. It is frustrating and disappointing! But Paul also says that, ultimately, the victory will be ours. Not because we will win it in our own right or power, but because Jesus Christ has already won the victory over sin and death for us. They are powerful forces, but in the end we will be free of them!

On this Table we have Elements that represents the very body and blood of Jesus. He gave Himself to win the victory. They are vanquished. The ultimate outcome is secure. Let me read to you today from Matthew:

Matthew 26:26-29 – While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

Babylon the Great

This morning our Scripture is once again back in Revelation. This is chapter 17 of Revelation's 22 chapters. We are nearing the end! But the best part of this revelation is at the end, and I do not want to rush through the triumph of our Lord and His people. So we'll break for Thanksgiving and finish up sometime afterwards.

Listen while I read Revelation chapter 17, and then we'll go back and I'll try to pick out some important pieces:

Revelation 17 – One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.”

Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. The name written on her forehead was a mystery:

BABYLON THE GREAT
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. Then the angel said to me: "Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns. The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and yet will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because it once was, now is not, and yet will come.

"This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for only a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

"The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers."

Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to hand over to the beast their royal authority, until God's words are fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth."

Have you ever heard of anyone who has a "persecution complex"? It's like being really paranoid and thinking that people are out to get you. I have known churches that like to think of themselves as being very alone. They believe and thrive on taking an "us vs. them" position in their doctrine and they encourage this persecution mentality in their members.

Now in the USA, one has to work pretty hard to maintain this kind of perspective. We are free to worship as we please! You have to define "Christian" very narrowly to imagine that you are one of only a few in this country.

Sadly, though, this was not the case for the early Christian church. In the time when the Revelation was written, persecution was very, very real. These Christians were living under the Roman emperor Nero, who was the most cruel (and perhaps a bit insane) of all rulers. They were experiencing persecution that we can hardly imagine. I think that John, writing in this chapter, means to speak directly to their present experience. I also believe it tells us that a similar type of intense persecution of God's people may happen again.

In this chapter John tells us about another vision he has had. Here he sees a drunken prostitute. Now this is certainly strange imagery! You don't expect to find such things in the Bible! It conveys something that is vile, filthy, disgusting.

It's pretty obvious that the prostitute of John's vision is the city of Rome. The prostitute sits on seven hills (v. 9). Even in John's day, as today, the city of Rome was known as "the city on seven hills." John, of course, doesn't name the city of Rome, but calls the city "Babylon." This is a code name. Remember, he is a prisoner of the Romans, so he can't name the city by its rightful name. Babylon is the perfect secret name! If you remember your Old Testament history, you will know that Babylon was one of the most powerful pagan cities. It was the Babylonians who sacked the city of Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon's temple, looting it of its holy objects.

Now here is this "prostitute." She wears rich, expensive clothing of purple and scarlet, glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She holds a golden cup in her hand. This opulence describes Rome, the greatest city of the time. And then, just in case you didn't get it, John says in the very last verse of the chapter: "The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." (vs. 18)

Next John says that with her -with Rome- the kings of the earth have "committed adultery." This is an interesting metaphor. Several times in the Bible God accuses Israel of committing adultery against Him when they fail to keep the covenant and when they go after pagan gods. Likewise, Rome has caused all nations on earth to reject God and to reject all that is pure, right, noble, just and decent. They are interested in nothing but wealth, power and pleasure! Caesar is claiming to be God! He is trying to stamp out anything and anyone who does not worship him.

The early Christians are the ones who are experiencing the brunt of Caesar's vanity and anger. As they received and read John's letter, it must have been comforting for them to know that John knew what they were going through, and, more importantly, that God saw and knew about it. Listen to what he says: The prostitute, Rome, has become *drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus!* Appalling!!!

I feel sorry for John. He is probably the last of the Apostles alive. He saw Jesus and walked with Him in the flesh. He witnessed the miracles. He was there at the empty tomb, the ascension and the day of Pentecost. He had watched and worked as the Church was built. Now he sees his "little children," the Christians in his flock, suffering so very badly.

Let's move on in the text. Obviously a lot of what John sees is about things that have already happened, or are happening in his own day. But it seems to me that his vision is also about things that have not yet happened. There are more kings to come. Babylon will one day be destroyed.

The destruction of Rome takes place several centuries after John's book was written. But there are also times, within this vision, in which the prostitute seems to represent more than just the ancient city of Rome. I believe the vision also points to a future time of conflict. In those verses the prostitute represents ALL earthy powers aligned with Satan against God. Notice that John describes a Great War that will take place one day. The Beast's forces will march against God's people and against the Lamb, and they will meet for battle at a place called Armageddon. I don't believe that this has already happened. It is part of John's vision whose fulfillment is "not yet."

It is hard to personalize this stuff! How does any of it speak to our situation here at Rappahannock Christian Church today?

Surely we can look back (and look forward) and be thankful that we do not live in the terrible time of persecution. We can be thankful for the freedom that we have. At the same time, though, we have to recognize and admit that there is, even now, a struggle ongoing between God and Satan, between Good and Evil. Even if it is not always visible and external, we are part of that struggle. I know I have said this before in this study of Revelation. Every day we are called to walk the same path that Jesus walked, just like they were in John's day and just like the Christians will be in the last days.

This reminds me of the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. I love the way that Jesus paints word-pictures to make His meanings alive to us. Here He speaks of a broad way filled with travelers, and a little path, His path, that is hard to find and follow:

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (Matthew 7:13-14)

Benediction

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face to shine upon us, that thy way may be known upon the earth, thy saving power among all nations. – Psalm 19:14