

Listen! – Worship the Worthy One

Revelation 5:1-14

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I am not an artist. In fact, you'd struggle to find a less arty person than me. On the rare occasion that I visit an art gallery, it mainly involves wandering around, lingering for a minute or 2 if something particularly catches my eye, and then leaving feeling more confused than anything else – particularly when it's modern art.

I'm not an artist, but I do have some very arty friends, and they tell me that in order to really see and appreciate a work of art, you have to spend time with it, to look at it from different angles, distances and perspectives, to pay attention to how it makes you feel, and to just spend time gazing at it. And that as you do, you start to notice new things and spot different features that reveal layers of meaning and depth and allow the art to speak to you in new ways.

I think there's something about this in our approach to the book of Revelation. It all seems a bit bizarre – winged animals covered with eyes, a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes – and so we can find ourselves skimming over much of it, at least until we get to the good stuff towards the end. But when we take time to sit with it, to explore it in more depth and allow ourselves to be drawn into the scene that John is painting for us, trusting the Holy Spirit to guide our reflections and open our eyes to more of who God is, then it begins to speak to us in new and profound ways. My hope this morning is that we can do some of that together.

I want to start with a little recap of where we are in the flow of the book. In chapters 1-3, we have these seven letters, written to seven different churches who need to be encouraged and challenged in different ways. And these letters are addressing specific on-the-ground situations. Then in chapter 4 we get this dramatic shift as John, in his vision, is summoned up into the throne room of heaven. And what he sees and describes in chapters 4 and 5 is perhaps the most important vision of the whole book, and we'll discover why that is as we move through the passage.

So John is standing in the throne room of heaven. At the centre he sees someone seated on the throne, surrounded by a rainbow and in front of it, what looks like a glassy sea; there's thunder and lightning and these 7 burning lamps; immediately around the throne are these four winged creatures, with the faces of a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle, and their bodies and wings are covered in eyes. Surrounding them are 24 other thrones, on which 24 elders sit, dressed in white and wearing crowns of gold. Numbers are important in the book of Revelation – there are different takes on what the numbers represent here, but I think the strongest argument is that the 24 elders represent the 12 tribes of Israel, plus the 12 apostles – in other words, the entire people of God, Jew and Gentile. The winged creatures draw on imagery from Ezekiel and Isaiah – and they represent the angelic beings, one for each compass point of the earth. So in both cases there's this sense of wholeness – the whole people of God, and angelic beings from every corner of the universe. And together they are wrapped up in this cosmic and constant flow of praise of the one who sits on the throne. Falling down before him and laying down their crowns, they say:

Revelation 4:11

(NIVUK) 11 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'

And then John notices a scroll in the right hand of the one who sits on the throne. John never explicitly tells us what's written on the scroll, but based on other references, we might assume that it reveals God's plan for the rescue and redemption of the world. An angel calls out...

Revelation 5:2

(NIVUK) 2 **'Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?'**

Deafening silence across the universe. It begs the question, surely God himself, who sits on the throne, is worthy to open it? Who could be more worthy than him?! But it is by God's design that the scroll can only be opened, its message delivered, by a human being. Because he has committed himself, back in Genesis 1 and 2, to working *with* humankind – to giving us a crucial part to play in his plan for the whole of creation. And such is God's unwavering commitment to that, that he cannot open the scroll himself. But if not him, then who? Who is worthy? Time and time again, the human race and God's own people, have proved ourselves unworthy, untrustworthy, unreliable. And so in his vision, John weeps, under this weight of hopelessness – there is no one worthy. All is lost.

But then he hears the voice of one of the elders saying:

Revelation 5:5

(NIVUK) 5 **'See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.'**

What sweet relief, joy, and excitement those words would have brought. 'Lion of Judah, Root of David' – titles that represented Israel's hopes and expectations for a Messiah – a conquering Messiah who would defeat their enemies, liberate them once and for all, and make all things right. It's the ultimate picture of strength and power and victory. All is well, the elder says; Israel's promised Messiah is here.

So, John turns to look, and what happens next is one of the most powerful moments in all of Scripture. Because what he sees when he turns to witness the arrival of the conquering king...isn't a majestic warrior with shining armour and rippling muscles, but a Lamb – a slaughtered Lamb. And so, John somehow has to make sense of the fact that his ears and his eyes are telling him two different stories. He hears the elder announce the arrival of the conquering Lion of Judah, strong and powerful – but he sees a slaughtered lamb, small, weak, and vulnerable. These are such contrasting images that it seems impossible for both things to be true – surely, he can't be both??

Faced with such a clear contradiction, it's tempting to try and resolve the tension one way or another - to acknowledge both, but to ultimately identify Jesus as either lion or lamb. But this vision doesn't give John, or us, that option. It's in holding those two images together, and allowing each to make sense of the other, that we begin to see and understand who Jesus really is and what he has done. He is Lion *and* Lamb, conquering king *and* sacrificial lamb. Notice the strange language that John uses:

Revelation 5:6

(NIVUK) **6 ...a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain...**

Again, that doesn't seem to make sense – surely, if the lamb has been slaughtered, it wouldn't be standing? Unless...death was not the end of the story. And that's the power of this image; in it, death and resurrection, sacrifice and victory, are fused together in the body of the Lamb. Jesus has won the decisive victory, not just over Israel's enemies, but over all the forces of evil and sin and death – he is the lion of Judah. But he has won that victory *through* the offering of himself as the once-for-all sacrifice – he is the slaughtered lamb. Victory through, and only through, sacrifice.

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So, in this image of the lamb, death and resurrection, sacrifice and victory, are fused together. But there's more, because let's not forget where the Lamb is standing – in the throne room of heaven. And so, this image also speaks of Jesus's ascension – of his exaltation to the highest place.

Philippians 5:5-11

(NIVUK) ⁵ ...Jesus: ⁶ who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen!

Faced with the challenges of life and the brokenness of the world, we may be tempted to resign ourselves to the fact that things are the way they are - that we just have to wait for Jesus's return, when he'll put everything right, and in the meantime, just accept things as they are. But I wonder... in taking that view, have we lost sight of the Lion? Have we lost sight of the victory that Jesus has already won and the transformative power of that victory in the here and now. Jesus has given us hope for the future, but it is a hope that we can hold on to and live out of today. And so perhaps we need to spend some time gazing at the Lion.

On the other hand, we may be tempted to fight fire with fire. Humanity hasn't changed all that much – we still live in a world in which “success” comes through dominance, power and strength. And at times we may be tempted to play by those rules. Jesus has won the victory and therefore we can throw our weight around. And that may lead us into ways of being and engaging with the world that are aggressive. In that instance, I wonder if we have embraced the Lion, but lost sight of the Lamb – whether we have embraced the victory that Jesus has won, but have lost sight of the way that it was won – through self-giving love and sacrifice. And so we may need to spend some time gazing at the Lamb.

Given some of the things we are witnessing and experiencing in the world at the moment, I think we need to be particularly alert to instances where violence, intimidation and fear-mongering are taking place under the banner of the Christian faith and in the name of Jesus. Wherever the name of Jesus is being evoked, we need to be asking ourselves whether this is a faithful representation of Jesus who is both Lion and Lamb. It's not a question of what we would prefer him to be – of what version of him fits best with our worldview or agenda. He is lion and lamb and if one or other is missing from the picture then something is wrong and we need to be brought back to this image, because in it we see who Jesus really is.

So not only does the image of lion and lamb tell us who Jesus is, it also calls his followers to a radically new way of being in the world, a way of being that refuses to play by the accepted rules, and instead reflects the self-giving love of Jesus.

Before his death, when Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, the disciples are jostling for position, trying to establish a pecking order of who is the greatest and who deserves positions of honour. Jesus, ever patient, calls them together and says this:

Mark 10:42-45

(NIVUK) ⁴² ‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

Remember the question asked by the angel – “who is worthy?” – a question that was met with deafening silence and hopelessness and despair. Well here at last is the one who is worthy. Jesus, the lion and the lamb. He alone among all human beings is worthy. He alone stands perfect and blameless before God. And he alone is the fulfilment of God’s promise, of his commitment to working *with* humankind.

As John watches, he sees the Lamb approach the throne and take the scroll from the right hand of God. This handing over the scroll is a sharing of the power, authority and honour that belong only to God. And the seven eyes of the Lamb, the ‘seven spirits of God’, represent the all-seeing and all-powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in the world. And so, Jesus is identified with and placed alongside God and the Holy Spirit.

This is one of the clearest and most powerful statements that the Bible makes about Jesus's sovereignty – about his place in the trinity that is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And so awesome is this moment, this revelation, that the elders and creatures fall to their knees and pour out their praise – only now their praise is not only directed to the one who sits on the throne, but to the Lamb as well.

Revelation 5:9-10

(NIVUK) ⁹ 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. ¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.'

Worthy *because* he was slain. Victory through sacrifice. And through that sacrifice he has redeemed people from every corner of the earth *and* has made them to be a kingdom and a priesthood. Redeemed and re-made. And so redemption is not just about Jesus rescuing us from sin and death – it is also about restoring in us the image of God and re-affirming the call on our lives – the call to be his image-bearers in the world – a people whose lives reflect the glory of God. Verse 10 echoes all the way back to Genesis, where human beings, made in the image of God, are given a crucial part to play in his plan for the world. And to Exodus, where that calling, that vocation is reaffirmed in the life of God's people:

Exodus 19:5-6

(NIVUK) ⁵ 'Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

Jesus doesn't just save us *from* something, he also saves us *for* something. Tom Wright describes priests in God's kingdom as those "who are called to stand at the dangerous but exhilarating point where heaven and earth meet...part of the earth, yet reflecting the life and love of heaven".

And this passage tells us something about what standing in that place involves. If we look again at verse 8, we see that each of the elders is holding a golden bowl full of incense, and John tells us that that incense is the prayers of God's people. In this vision, our prayers become a kind of umbilical cord between heaven and earth... Some of you will have experience of other church traditions where incense is used in worship – it's a powerful, tangible reminder that our prayers and our worship, as feeble and insignificant as they may feel, whether they are full of joy or of heartbreak and sadness, they are not lost in the ether – they are carried up to heaven and are held before God. And though we stand with our feet firmly on the ground, through our prayers and our worship we are participating here and now in the life of heaven.

What follows in John's vision is this ever-expanding circle of praise, with the throne and the Lamb at the centre.

Revelation 5:11-14

(NIVUK) ¹¹ Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. ¹² In a loud voice they were saying: 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!' ¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!'

And heaven responds with an almighty Amen!



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