

### **Sermon on Revelation 21:1-8 – May 24, 2020**

From quite a young age, I have always enjoyed reading books. Even now, normally, I have 2 or 3 books always on the go. And for the life of me, I have never understood why someone would buy a book, or get one from a library, and after reading just a few pages, go to the back of the book to see how it ends. Why would you do that? You have missed out on the best bits of the book – the storyline, how the characters have developed, the plot twists, imagining the different situations and locations that the characters find themselves in, and maybe how all of that resonates with your own life and finally, of course, why the story ended as it did. And I am wondering if we can think about our passage today in a similar way and I will try to explain how this might work.

As a person of Christian faith, you cannot help but smile and feel tremendous joy when you read the beginning of this passage. It is our one supreme hope, our great desire and our joy to contemplate the new heaven and new earth and God being with his people. I do not have the words to even begin to describe how this might actually feel – I am not sure that any human being does, not even the Apostle Paul who could only say in 1 Corinthians – ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’. It is so wonderful to contemplate a new world with no suffering, no illness, no poverty, no Covid-19 and I am pretty sure that whatever I could say with my meagre words would not do it justice anyway.

And speaking of justice, this week is the final talk in our sermon series on justice. For the past five weeks, we have been talking about justice in different ways and the theme for this week is perfect justice. And if we are talking about perfect justice, we must, of course, be talking about God’s justice. God’s justice must be perfect – it cannot be anything else! And I want to speak about how His perfect justice can only come from His perfect love and perfect holiness. And it is not just His perfect justice that we are being told about today, it is His final justice. In the new Heaven and new earth, there will no need to even think about justice, as God himself will be with us. But God has let us know that in the end times, there is an absolute requirement for His perfect justice – justice for those who have completely rejected God and gone their own way, justice for the unrepentant who have never been brought to justice for the terrible crimes they committed during their own lives, and justice on behalf of the victims who were abused, tortured, trafficked or murdered by evil people –

these are the same victims who have put their trust in God that He will deal with this tremendous injustice at a time of his choosing.

We cannot speak about His perfect justice without speaking also about His perfect judgement. In our modern society, judgement is often portrayed incredibly negatively. Yet, the truth is that if we care anything about justice, judgement is something that is a totally necessary thing and must happen. The preceding chapters to Revelation 21 are all about defeating the powers of evil, which care absolutely nothing about justice in any way, shape or form – in fact, they are the very antithesis of justice. Without God's perfect justice and judgement, we simply would not get to chapter 21 – there would be no new Heaven and new earth. God does not want his beautiful creation to be forever spoiled by evil, to be torn apart by suffering and pain and for injustice to be allowed to triumph without restriction. God's perfect justice is the culmination of Jesus' death on the cross and his glorious resurrection which showed us that sin and death had been defeated. The judgement that we deserve was borne by our Saviour and Redeemer. The Holy Spirit was poured out, with grace and mercy and forgiveness abounding and endless, to save those who have turned to our Lord, Jesus Christ. All of this happened for a purpose, and for a reason and our passage for today absolutely confirms that to be case.

By contrast, human justice is by definition, imperfect – sometimes to the point of being very unjust and incredibly unfair. We all of us have different views on justice – some of you may be thinking that it is very unjust to listen to me on a Sunday morning. But we should all care about justice in the very deepest sense of the word. God wants us to think about justice right now – not just criminal justice, but social justice, economic justice - justice in all its' forms. We are not to simply focus on our own salvation and leave it to God to deal with justice at the end of times. I would say that it is those who are most caring about suffering and injustice that most look forward to a new Heaven and a new earth. It is those who are spreading the knowledge of God's love that look most forward to the day when the tears will be wiped from every eye and there will no more death, or mourning or crying in pain. Hallelujah, Amen!

At the same time, I believe that we have to be careful how we speak about judgement and justice, perhaps especially in these times – because this is God's work. We do not know

what God is doing about judgement – only He knows, and we can never know unless it has been specifically revealed to us. He does not ask for our approval or for our recommendation. Before I start to think, to say or to act on ‘what is God going to do about so and so’, I am reminded to think about myself and not trusting in my own righteousness, but in the grace of God that is saving me. And carrying on with the theme of books, I am so prayerfully hoping that my name will be in a book that no-one has read and that is mentioned in the previous chapter of Revelation, and that is the book of life. It is fine to have a strong and sure faith, but we are all to be thankful for what He has done for us before we start to judge others.

I am sure that at one time, we have all met a Christian who is keen to remind people of God’s judgement before any mention is given to speaking about his love. When I was growing up, I saw and heard an awful lot of that. Personally, it did not speak to me in any way – in fact, it left me rather cold and disinterested. In truth, I wanted to hear about God’s love, His grace and His mercy before hearing anything about the fiery lake of burning sulphur. I am minded to think about how Jesus himself spoke to sinners – for example, speaking to the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4 who is drawing water from a well and Jesus is promising her the water of life which is mentioned here in our passage in verse 6. It seems to me that Jesus always spoke from a perspective of love and not the threat of judgement. We would do well to follow his lead in these things.

In one way, I wish that I could just talk to you about verses 1-7, but the reality of our human lives is also in verse 8 which speaks in very direct terms of the consequences of God’s perfect justice and judgement – and maybe in some way that mirrors how some people think and feel while searching for faith – we only want the good and not the bad, we only want the easy part and not the difficult part. We don’t mind that God has paid the price, but we would much rather that it does not really cost us. There is very little justice in any of those feelings. And I wonder how many people have started to read a book and given up after 20 or 30 pages because it was too slow, or maybe after 50 pages because ‘I just couldn’t seem to get into it’ or ‘it wasn’t what I thought it would be, or maybe even after 100 pages because I found this other book and it seemed more interesting and much more me. When you only read half the book, you only get half the story! When you understand that the world right now is not how God intends it to be, and when you understand what He

has done to prepare the way for a new Heaven and a new earth to actually happen, it is incredibly important that we read all of the book. Unfortunately, however, this is how some people respond to the journey of faith and the passage today reminds us of the importance of going right to end, through all of difficult parts, to 'finish well' and not be tempted to give up.

It is likely that verse 8 is difficult reading for some, and totally justifiable and right for others. In preparing my talk this week, I have struggled a bit here with what to say. I have read a number of different viewpoints and perspectives on this, some literal and some more conciliatory. I would say I am not any kind of a 'fire and brimstone' type preacher, but I unreservedly and completely trust in the Lord. We bring our lives to Him, we ask for his forgiveness and for wisdom in understanding and in speaking to others. We pray for those that do not have faith, we pray for humility in ourselves, and we speak of God's love and give thanks for an amazing gift that we are completely unworthy of.

Maybe there are some who are not familiar with the term, 'the second death', as it is something that only is explicitly mentioned in the book of Revelation. The first death is a physical death that is encountered by us all. The second death can be considered to be a spiritual death meted out to those who absolutely will not yield to Almighty God under any circumstances, and will suffer the consequences of their choices – eternal separation from God for eternity – and for people of faith, if that is not a profound version of hell, I don't know what is. Earlier in the book of Revelation, in chapter 2, verse 11, Jesus himself tells us that believers will not experience the second death – I am sure this is something that should provide great comfort to us all.

I have had the privilege of being involved in the Alpha course here at St Mary's church since Andrew and Jenny started running them five years ago. It is something I truly love doing – it is so great seeing people coming to faith and growing in faith. And maybe rather than having 15 or 16 weekly sessions and discussions about different aspects of Christian faith, we should just give the participants of the course, a Bible opened at Revelation chapter 21, verse 1, and ask them to read the next seven verses. Now, it is possible that this might be sufficient to convince them that faith in Jesus Christ is the right thing for them in their lives.

However, in reality, I don't believe that evangelism is really that easy. We need to read the whole book, to fully and completely understand who Jesus is and what he did for us.

Today, I have talked a lot about books and we have looked at a very beautiful part of scripture in an incredibly amazing book. We don't want anyone to miss out on this new heaven and new earth – which can only come out of God's perfect justice. And unless we too think about justice right now in this way, it just means that pain and suffering are prolonged and this is contrary to the wishes of a loving God.

And perhaps when we read this passage and we think about God's perfect justice, it might just be pointing to how we should be trying to live our lives right now in this rather imperfect world. Let us not be indifferent to the current injustices in the world, while we wait for His perfect justice. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – Amen.