

1 May 2022

Acts 9:1-6 [7-20]
Revelation 5:11-14
John 21:1-19

Is it Lion, or Lamb?

Which title and metaphor for Jesus most appeals to you? Is it the conquering Lion of Judah, or the suffering Lamb of God?

And what about you? Are you a lion-Christian, or a lamb-Christian?¹

Our lectionary compilers have given us just a few verses from Revelation 5 for today, wanting (I suspect) simply to use these particular verses in this Easter season as a way of modelling and expressing the praise due to Jesus Christ, the (metaphorical) lamb slain for us on the cross, who now, by his resurrection, is vindicated and is worthy of all praise. They are indeed magnificent and apt words.

However, this section of the book of Revelation is well worth digging into more deeply. Revelation was written to encourage the early church trying to make sense of the work of God in the midst of persecution under the brutal power of the Roman empire and in the face of the cult of Caesar worship.² I believe it can encourage us still in the face of the powers and false gods of the present.

In this part of the book, John, the writer, is caught up in a vision of the heavenly throne room, being shown how the affairs of the world intersect with what is going on in the courts of God.³ And the issue is that there is a problem in the world: God's perfect creation has been marred, and deadly forces are at work within it seeking to destroy the Creator's work.⁴ But then we find that God has a plan or project underway to address the problem: in the vision there is a scroll held in the right hand of the One sitting on the throne. The scroll is sealed with seven seals.

¹ This language comes from Wright, *Revelation*, p.54

² See Wright, *Revelation*, pp.2-5.

³ Wright, *Revelation*, 42-44

⁴ The material from here on draws freely on Wright, *Revelation*, pp.51-59.

And then we encounter another problem: there is no-one in all creation, no creature, worthy to open the scroll. The thing is, everyone in creation is implicated in the imperfection within creation; all contribute to the ongoing brokenness.

But that constitutes a major problem. God the creator committed himself, back in Genesis 1 and 2, to work within his creation *through obedient humankind*. That is how the world was designed to work. Someone – a human – must therefore be found.

From within the traditions of Israel, one answer would have been Israel. Israel itself is called to be God's true humanity, to put God's rescue plan into operation. But Israel too has failed, has let God down. God has resolved from the beginning to run the world through humans, and to rescue the world through Israel. Both have let him down. What will he do now? Does anyone deserve to open the scroll?

John weeps. And well he might. In human terms, and from a human viewpoint, the situation is quite hopeless.

But then John is directed to *look*: to look at the lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David. Here is the answer: it is the Messiah. The prophets held that the Messiah would come David's tribe, the tribe of Judah – and as Genesis draws to a close Judah is described by Jacob as a lion's cub, and it is a picture of royal power:

⁹ 'You are a lion's cub, Judah;
you return from the prey, my son.

Like a lion he crouches and lies down,
like a lioness – who dares to rouse him?

¹⁰ The sceptre will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he to whom it belongs shall come

and the obedience of the nations shall be his. [Genesis 49:9-10]

The image of the lion was picked up in later visionary writing, known in the time that John was writing, in which the Messiah is depicted as a lion to attack the 'eagle' of the Roman empire. And the 'root of David' phrase was also a well-known messianic

image having its origins in Isaiah 11 (where the reference is to David's father, Jesse).

As we would expect from the true Messiah, we are told not just that he 'deserves' to open the scroll, but that he 'has won the victory'. The Messiah, it was thought, would fight and win the decisive battle against the last great enemy of God's people, and so liberate them once and for all. Well, says the elder to John, he has done it! Here he is!

And now we come to one of the most decisive moments in all scripture. What John has *heard* is the announcement of the lion. What he then *sees* is the lamb. A tattered lamb. A lamb that looks like it has been slaughtered. John must have been shocked.⁵ He has to hold what he has heard in his head while gazing at what he now sees; and has to hold what he is seeing in his head as he reflects on what he has heard. The two seem radically different. The lion is the symbol both of ultimate power and of supreme royalty, while the lamb symbolises both gentle vulnerability and, through its sacrifice, the ultimate weakness of death. But the two are now to be fused together, completely and for ever. From this moment on, John, and we as his careful readers, are to understand that the victory won by the lion is accomplished *through the sacrifice of the lamb*, and in no other way. But we are also to understand that what has been accomplished by the lamb's sacrifice is not merely the wiping away of sin for a few people here and there. The victory won by the lamb is God's lion-like victory – through his faithful Israel-in-person, through his obedient humanity-in-person – over all the forces of corruption and death, over everything that would destroy and obliterate God's good, powerful and lovely creation.

And so we come at last to the part the lectionary compilers have given us today – beginning with the angels' song of praise:

'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honour and glory and praise!' [Revelation 5:12]

⁵ Daniels

Because of who he is and what he has done, Jesus, the lion-lamb, deserves all the honour and glory of which creation is capable.⁶ The wealth and strength of the nations belongs to him; everything that elevates and enriches human life, everything that enables people to live wisely, to enjoy and celebrate the goodness of God's world – all this is to be laid at his feet.

If we ever get a bit too self-absorbed and think of Jesus purely in terms of our own comfort and hope; if we ever get too worldly-minded and assign to earthly rulers and forces our riches, honouring, and loyalty; ... then this passage is a sharp reminder of to whom it all really belongs.

And the final song, in which every creature in every part of God's creation joins, highlights the profound fact that the lamb shares the praise which belongs to the one and only God.⁷ This glimpse of the divinity of Jesus, part of the Trinitarian nature of God, is a reminder that the whole plan – the scroll held in the hand of the one sitting upon the throne – is the plan of the creator God who is intimately involved with his world and who loves it still. The lion-lamb who solves the problems of failed humanity and failed Israel from within humankind and Israel comes from the very heart of God. The lion-lamb rescues creation because God still has a plan and purpose for creation and for his kingly reign within and over creation.

“Worthy is the lamb that was slain...” sing the angels. “Blessing and honour, glory and power...” sing all creation. Handel, and his librettist Charles Jennens, set these words at the end of their oratorio *Messiah*. In the oratorio these words are followed by a great “Amen” which swells on and on for four minutes or so, and climaxes with trumpets and kettledrums. We can easily get the feeling that it is all over, that the story is complete in the victory.

And in one sense it is: it is all done; the conclusion is secure.

⁶ Wright, *Revelation* p. 57

⁷ Wright, *Revelation*, pp. 58-59

But in another really important sense, it is not all done. For one thing, the vision of Revelation goes on for another 16 chapters. But the point I want to focus on is different, and it involves us.

Just before the songs of the angels and all creation in Revelation 5 there is another song.⁸ The picture is of representative humanity bringing humankind's prayers and praise, and in the song that is sung we find that the lamb is being praised, not just for rescuing us, but for turning us from hopeless rebels into useful servants, from slaves to sin into 'a kingdom and priests', from rubbish into royalty. The lamb rescues humankind for an ongoing role, the role we were given at creation: to rule the rest of creation on God's behalf, and to act as go-betweens – representing creation's needs to God, carrying creation's worship to God, and representing God to creation.

It is a tremendous vocation.

But it is vital that we are clear on how our vocation is to be expressed and out-worked.

There have been, down the years, plenty of lion-Christians.⁹ Yes, they think, Jesus died for us; but now God's will is to be done in the lion-like fashion, through brute force and violence, to make the world come into line, to enforce God's will.¹⁰ No, replies John; think of the lion, yes, but gaze at the lamb.

And there have been plenty of lamb-Christians. Yes, they think, Jesus may have been 'the lion of Judah', but that's a political idea which we should reject because salvation consists in having our sins wiped away so that we can get out of this compromised world and go off to heaven instead. No, replies John; gaze at the lamb, but remember that it is the lion's victory that he has won.

Another John, John the Evangelist, wrote the Gospel that bears that name. There is dispute about whether it was he, or someone from within his group, that gave us

⁸ Wright, *Revelation* p.56

⁹ Wright, *Revelation* p.54

¹⁰ This matches closely with themes found in both Nadella and Daniels commentaries on the other readings.

chapter 21 which appears to be an add-on.¹¹ There is much that could be said about this wonderfully evocative account of the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples in Galilee a week or more after his resurrection. The point that really stands out to me today sits around the latter part of today's reading, where we see Jesus reinstating Peter. Peter, we recall, had boldly declared that, even if everyone else among the disciples fell away, he would remain faithful to the end (Mark 14:27-31). But it had ended up just so many words as, during Jesus' trial, Peter denied even knowing him. Here, in the appendix to the Gospel of John, we have the painful business of Jesus searching Peter's heart – "Peter, do you love me more than these other disciples do?", "Peter do you love me?", "Peter do you love me?". Three questions matching the three denials. And three affirmative responses from Peter; along with tears in the vulnerability of his guilt. Then there is the threefold commissioning: "Feed my lambs", "take care of my sheep", "feed my sheep".

Given that this is part of an add-on to the Gospel, the question has often been asked, Why? Why add this chapter 21?

And one plausible answer is that it was felt necessary to ensure that Peter's subsequent leadership couldn't be undermined by anything lingering from his dreadful denials of Jesus.¹²

What strikes me about all this is that the ways of the world – the ways of empire, of power and privilege – would see the solution lying in simply excising the embarrassing part of Peter's history, erasing the denials from the circulating accounts of Jesus' trial. But instead we have the way of humility and vulnerability: the acknowledgement, the endlessly circulating account, of Peter's offence together with Jesus' act of forgiveness.¹³

Peter's commission is to feed the sheep, feed the lambs. There is something affectionate and gentle and comforting in that image of God's flock – of *us*. But let us never forget that we, God's lambs, are to follow the way of the lion-lamb, Jesus. Let us never forget that we are forgiven sinners. Let us never forget that we

¹¹ For discussion on the authorship etc see Beasley-Murray, *John*, pp.395-396

¹² Such Schreiner and Skinner give hints of this idea.

¹³ See Beasley-Murray *John*, p.407

are fed and cared for because we have work to do in the world. We too are called and commissioned to care for the lambs as under-shepherds. And let us not forget that we too are to be as lion-lambs, kings and priests.

Sources:

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