

Threads through Revelation: Setting the scene

Note: 'Threads through Revelation' is an exhibition of 14 large tapestry panels by Jacqui Parkinson, inspired by the Book of Revelation, to be exhibited in Victoria Methodist Church, Bristol, 4 September-14 October, 2024.

The overarching theme of my introductory reflections is 'Some aspects of Christian spirituality'. Let me explain. We are all familiar with the core promise of the gospel: that, in response to faith, the very life of God (the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Jesus) will flow into our inner selves from impenetrable depths at the root of the personality. When divine love floods the heart, there is change: a shift from self-concern and selfishness towards selflessness and self-giving to others. That's a lifelong and uneven process of inner change, 'from the inside out'. 'Christian spirituality' is the name given to a wide range of habits that support life in the Spirit. They include certain actions, priorities and habits that are encouraged in the Church to 'pull' us, as it were, 'from the outside' - to draw us out of our deeply-ingrained fascination with ourselves and to fix our attention on other people, and particular things. So, overall we are being changed when inner pressures (inspired by the Spirit within) are complemented by people and things outside of ourselves calling forth some love and care from us: 'push' from within and 'pull' from without. (All of it, as a matter of fact, the prompting of the Spirit.)

I want to reflect briefly on just three phenomena that pull us out of ourselves, that crack open our natural defensiveness, that draw us beyond our comfort zone.

1. Beauty

We cannot manage or control how it is that beautiful artefacts or people stop us in our tracks and engage our attention. We can never tell when something or someone beautiful is going to grasp us. It always comes with the character of a gift.

Nor can we assume any two of us will be attracted to the same sources of beauty. The range of possibilities is amazing - pictures and music (of all sorts), sculpture, a poem, a novel, a design, a landscape, a building, a tree or flower, a garden, the night sky, a meal, an encounter with a relative stranger, etc. Beauty - whenever and wherever we encounter it (rather, when it encounters us) - utterly amazes us, and fills us with wonder and awe. We stand or sit transfixed by it. It's as if it has a magnetic power to draw out of us a capacity for adoration. Beauty is riveting. It is an end in itself; but may also point beyond itself to the indescribable mystery of the divine Spirit.

We never want to possess what's beautiful: it appears to us as such a magnificent, infinitely valuable treasure, that it is literally beyond any price. But once someone or something beautiful has grabbed us, we do long to be engaged by it time and time again. We are never bored by what's beautiful. We can gaze and contemplate, listen and attend to it on endless occasions and always find something new and fresh, stimulating and invigorating. The beautiful also triggers in us extraordinary creativity. We don't need to understand what makes something or someone truly beautiful: we may try to analyse, interpret and understand it but essentially we

are talking here about being enraptured by someone or something. It gives us life; it certainly transcends our despairing and boring focus on ourselves. So we give it time - and that is never 'wasted' time.

When the textiles are in the Church, remember that they are works of art: engage with them with such an openness of mind and heart that you are willing to be electrified by them: the colours, the designs, or the scale of them may, for you, be worthy of the word 'beautiful'. You may well be fascinated by the technical skills that have led to their construction, the choice of colours, the phenomenal number of stitches, the method of construction. But in and through the practical skills on display, look for the possibility of something beautiful.

2. 'Sermons'

A story: BF Westcott, distinguished Anglican theologian in the 19th century, was asked by a trainee priest, worried about what lay ahead of him the following Sunday, 'Dr Westcott, what should I preach about?' Answer: 'Preach about Jesus, and preach about 20 minutes'.

The focus of every sermon is Jesus - whose words and actions were drenched in Holy Spirit. Jesus was a mysterious person - by choice a pauper, of no fixed abode. But he was significantly attractive to the poor and needy, the hurting and grieving. It was as if the Spirit that filled Jesus's heart and life oozed out of him, to envelop people who trusted him; and they found healing of body and mind.

This could happen anywhere - in a home, in the street, in a synagogue, in wide open spaces in the countryside, by a lake, etc.

Those closest to Jesus were stunned by this complex person. In a word, they were captivated by his beauty: not any physical beauty, but a beauty of mind and character. One story focuses this: the Transfiguration - though the words and images used in the story struggle to express the wonder of the experience.

Bible reading: Mark 9.2-8

Jesus went on from that story to suggest the transfiguration would make most sense after Jesus's death: that is, to the eyes of faith, Jesus would be spiritually ablaze with the glory, or beauty, of God. But first the link between Jesus and divine glory must be tested to breaking-point. For he died in the context of as much ugliness as we can imagine: alone, abused, exposed to hatred, injustice, humiliation, torture and cruelty - on a Roman cross.

And yet, for NT writers like the apostle Paul and the author of John's Gospel, a very daring claim was made. There, on the cross, God's beauty (or, glory) was supremely displayed! How so? Because the essence of divine glory is love, self-effacing, infinitely generous, self-giving love. Never was such love for loveless, hate-filled humanity more thoroughly expressed than on the cross. So: 'Look at the cross', says every preacher (hopefully, in every sermon). Look at the cross and see God's glory. Listen to the Spirit within you as you ponder the cross; and allow the Spirit to fire your imagination and fix your attention in the way that happens before everyone

and everything that is truly beautiful. Discern in your imagination the spiritual presence of Jesus now, always bearing the marks of his cruel suffering but also the transfigured Jesus - ablaze with the brilliance of divine love for you, oozing mercy and forgiveness for you, yearning to transform your heart and mind. The Spirit wants to enable you in so many contexts to glimpse the beauty of Jesus's love in the world today - especially among the suffering, the ugly, the violent, the grieving, the destitute and excluded people. And be inspired - says the preacher - to engage with them, in humble, loving service.

Every sermon, then, is intended to be a contemporary work of art that enables preachers themselves and hopefully their hearers, to go on that compelling journey of imaginative exploration and discovery, i.e. through suffering to glory and transfiguration. That happens primarily as we focus on Jesus; and secondarily as we focus on the hurting and needy world today. So a preacher tries to engage us at many levels - the intellect, our aesthetic sensibility, the many moral and spiritual challenges we face: and all this to draw us out of ourselves towards a Jesus-like life in the everyday world of healing and service, peace-making, care, justice and truth-telling.

Now, here's a point that we often overlook. We are schooled to receive sermons communicated in words (too many words!) But actually a sermon can be expressed in any medium. And Jacqui Parkinson has self-consciously created her 14 textile panels as 14 sermons. They spring from her heart, and express her faith in the medium she is most at home with. So when you look at and ponder the panels, please be alert to the possibility of discovering something of Jesus, his church and mission, that can deepen your own faith in his love and glory emerging in all sorts of situations, including violence, brokenness, sin and death.

3. 'The Revelation to/of John'

The most unusual feature we need to prepare for is this: Jacqui's panels were inspired by the Book of Revelation.

Bible reading: Revelation 1.1-11 (where the author introduces himself)

So, the author was named 'John' - as common a name then as now. All we know about him is that he was on Patmos, a small island off the SW coast of modern Turkey. Why was he there? We don't know for sure. Maybe he was doing pioneer missionary work; maybe he had caused too much trouble on the mainland with his extraordinary language and his doom-laden message so that he had been exiled to Patmos by the public authorities.

John had some sort of leadership role in 7 small churches on the mainland. The list in verse 11 sets out their locations in order, to form more or less a clockwise circular journey, from Ephesus round to Laodicea.

When was the book written? Probably, I think, in the 80's or early 90's of the first century AD. John was obsessed with the rise of the most recent Roman emperor, named Domitian. Domitian was full of self-glory, and insisted that citizens and enslaved peoples must worship himself as divine - on pain of persecution. John has already long hated the Roman empire, its history of tyranny and its ostentatious pursuit of wealth. Domitian was the last straw. So far, in

the 7 churches, there had been only one martyr to the emperor's edicts. But this tipped John over the edge. He was totally convinced the near future would unleash a torrent of Roman violence, killing and destruction against Christians. But, for John, this was a sign that the End of the world was imminent.

John had to hand, in his background, a complex and lurid set of images and events linked to the end of the world, accompanied by all manner of secret codes. Where had they come from? Probably from the wildest fringes of the Pharisee movement. Mainstream Pharisees believed that God would eventually, on the Last Day of history, act as Judge of the world. The Final Assize would be accompanied by the coming of the Messiah and of angels, and the general resurrection, so that judgement could begin. This speculation was reasonably restrained. It came from OT books like Daniel and Ezekiel. We can glimpse it in the first three Gospels in the NT, as a matter of fact.

But among the extremists of the Pharisee movement were people of a violent mind-set. Some were frankly terrorists, who constantly disrupted Roman rule with violent military-style attacks. Other violence-inclined extremists were what we call 'apocalyptists'. They were convinced that the Roman empire was in the grip of Satan; and only a God of wrath and war could take on Satan and prevail, in a battle of violence, killing and destruction like nothing else. They invented layer upon layer of imagery to describe this final and decisive conflict between good and evil - which, of course, God would win.

John of Patmos was soaked in apocalyptic, which he developed, as he himself describes, through visions, trance-like visitations and ecstatic experiences. And he believed that this sort of experience was a mark of being a true prophet of God.

Yet John had become a Christian. So, in the midst of all his war-like apocalyptic imagery, he sees also 'The Lamb that was slain' (namely Jesus), now in glory, worthy of worship by saints above and saints below. And indeed the ever-living Jesus Christ (whom he addressed, in the reading above, as 'the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth') was already at the centre of Christian worship in those 7 churches. The ever-living Christ was in the midst of each church as they gathered week by week (on the Lord's Day, says John, presumably Sunday), and entered into charismatic worship ('caught up in the Spirit') - an experience of ecstatic joy. Their worship also celebrated, in advance, the inevitable victory of God over Satan at the forthcoming Battle of Armageddon.

John knew full well that the command of Jesus to his followers is to love, and to endure in love - for one another - whatever is shortly to come their way, including persecution and killing. None of the churches was perfect, some were beset by internal divisions, and one had almost forgotten what love entails. But having expressed his pastoral concerns, and having majored on his own version of Christian worship, around Christ once slain but now in a central place in heaven and victorious for ever, John's apocalyptic mind-set runs riot. It's as if the 'old' John (as a Pharisee Jew) and the 'new' John (a Christian) somehow co-exist, without his being able to

review and criticise his Jewish apocalyptic background in the light of the humble, self-giving, peace-generating Jesus.

Once his apocalyptic background is unleashed, the only relief is near the conclusion of the Book of Revelation. There we encounter a vision of a wedding and a wedding feast; then a vision of a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven for God's saints now that the whole earth, and especially the Roman Empire, has been destroyed for ever. In its place, a new heaven and a new earth. And at last God dwells with God's saints. So there is no more crying or fear; the Lamb is at the centre of the city, its streets flow with the water of life, and the light of God (Jesus the Lamb) will dispense with the distinction between day and night. All will be good and peaceful in a realm of unbroken worship.

And all this will happen soon - once the detailed plan for destroying evil and death has been minutely laid out, with its opaque and sometimes distasteful detail - and fulfilled.

In my view, from the outset all this was meant poetically. But we know that through the centuries, cranks have taken it literally and looked for its enactment in their own historical circumstances.

But how shall we deal with this strange and complex book?

My suggestion is this, in three simple statements.

1. Hold to our core convictions of faith, revealed in Jesus, and hold to them with great tenacity: God is love, and there is nothing about God that ever, in any circumstances, contradicts God's love. Love never entails violence.
2. God's love underpins every moment of our lives - not just when we gather for worship, even less for ecstatic worship. God's Spirit (the Spirit of Jesus) is always closer to us than we can ever describe. And the Spirit's generosity is marked by endless gifts and blessings showered on us day by day, even when we are hurting or disappointed. So, every day we are grateful for God's presence, God's love and God's loving gifts.
3. Expect God to surprise us! Our God's infinite kindness, the Spirit from time to time leaps into our hearts - so to speak, 'out of the blue'; the Spirit leaps into our hearts and imaginations with new insights, with moments of great joy, and sometimes with spectacular challenges (that can inspire a dramatic change in our values or push us in a new direction in our lives). Never, ever fail to be on the look-out for a God of surprises! The Spirit may engage with us through someone or something stunningly beautiful that suddenly confronts us; or through the words of a preacher or the lives of faith shared by other Christian people, or through the people we encounter any day and every day (our family and friends, our neighbours, or complete strangers, or people who are hurting or in crisis). Never underestimate what wonder, extraordinary generosity and indescribable help can surprise us in the midst of everyday chores and habits, especially in our tough

moments when we are afraid of the future or regretful about the past. The Spirit's mercy is without limit!

So, approach the 14 textile panels that will surround us in the coming weeks in that spirit of faith, love and hope!

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