

**Epiphany 2**  
**15/1/2017**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 49:1-7**

**Psalm 40**

**1 Corinthians 1:1-9**

**John 1:29-42**

## **The Revelation of God and the World**

Sermon preached by Dr Michael Champion

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‘I came that he might be *revealed* to Israel’. We are in the glorious season of revelation. But revelation is dangerous. With the coming of Jesus, we were confronted by the massacre of the innocents. Last week we heard of the baptism of Jesus, which threw him into a chaotic world. And today’s revealer, John the Baptist, will soon be brutally beheaded. For revelation offends and threatens.

First, it offends reason because it puts a mere person where reason demands a universal principle. ‘Behold the Lamb of God’ – Jesus, a particular man in a particular time and place, not the pure, eternal Being of natural religion. And historical revelation like this is chancy, contingent, unpredictable, and therefore unreasonable since unjust. Why should God be there and not here, then and not now, with you and not me? Second, divine revelation offends and threatens both the powerful and the reasonable. A Herod or a Hume can only see it as an abusive act of power. A revealed God, in this view, threatens worldly authority and forecloses debate and exploration. So-called revealed truths, then, are mere claims to power, attempts to put religious claims (and religious professionals) beyond rational challenge. And third, revelation offends against individual choice and self-determination. I know myself best, and know best what is good for me. And if I am religiously inclined, then I know best what sort of relationship I have with God. Who are you to tell me who God is, and what that means for me? And John, of course, presumes to reveal Jesus not just to people, but to a people, to Israel, not just to individuals.

One can’t help but think that John would have met as sticky an end today as he did back then, and not only if he brought his proclamation to the churches. Revelation offends. It’s unreasonable, an act of abusive religious power, and a scandal in a world where individuals determine what they believe and who they are, in the absence of authoritative communities, institutions, or traditions.

But today’s gospel, as always, reframes and relativises these modern objections. The first thing to say is that revelation has nothing to do with additional knowledge. John repeatedly insists that he does not know Jesus. ‘I myself did not know him...but I came baptising that he might be revealed’. ‘I saw the spirit descending and abiding in him’; but immediately thereafter ‘I myself did not know him’.

Certainly, John testifies that Jesus is the divine Son because the Father reveals that Jesus is the divine bearer of the Holy Spirit. But that is to say that in lives open to God like John’s, it is possible to recognise, if not to comprehend, the divine presence. Just so, as the Evangelist famously proclaims elsewhere, we receive power to become children of God. Revelation, then, invites us to change the way we live. It is not the pouring of new knowledge into an unwilling subject. Still less is it God setting himself

up as another powerful agent in the world, since God is freely beyond such human strife. So it cannot be the forceful deployment of special knowledge battling reason.

What John points to, and what we recognise by grace, is God freely offering himself to the world. So to experience revelation is to experience divine freedom. Revelation is God freely giving himself to us, as far as possible. But even to begin to imagine such unlimited divine freedom and eternal desire for relationship, is to be overwhelmed by the radical gap between finite minds and the reality of divine fullness. ('He was before me, he ranks ahead of me', says John, in cosmic understatement). Revelation draws the mind into the presence of God, where it recognises its limitations, its weakness, and its ignorance, in the face of the divine glory in which it nonetheless shares.

For revelation puts the lie to the fiction that we are the best judges of ourselves, and that we can know all there is to know, about ourselves, about others, and about the world. In the light of God, we find ourselves laid bare and placed under an infinitely loving judgement that changes our lives in a way no universal principle ever could. 'God is more intimate to me than I myself', as Augustine had it. Our fantasies about ourselves are stripped away and replaced by the vision of God: by the just, forgiving, merciful scrutiny of the God who loves us and takes our sins upon himself. 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world'. Beholding God means recognising our sins, and recognising the redemption of our sins by the peaceful Lamb. For the one who identifies sins mercifully forgives them, and compassionately takes them on himself. He will strengthen us to the end, that we may be blameless in the light of his coming. For the one who baptizes by the Holy Spirit thereby draws us into the life of God.

The key is that the revelation of God is just so the revelation of creation. In the revelation of God, the truth of the world – both its radical distance from the transcendent God, and its radical value in God's eyes – is revealed. In the sight of God, we become our true selves. As Paul has it, 'those sanctified in Christ Jesus [are] called to be saints', those in whom the light of God's glory shines.

So John becomes the baptizer because of the divine self-revelation of Jesus. And we see this dynamic again at work when the first disciples have the Lamb of God revealed to them. 'Behold the Lamb of God', proclaims John. And immediately when 'the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus'. The revelation of God makes us change our lives. More, it gives us a new, renewed identity. Andrew announces to Simon that 'We have found the Messiah', and when Simon too comes into the Messiah's presence, he receives his true identity. 'You are to be called Cephas', the rock on which the body of Christ is built.

Revelation, then, entails relationship with God, recognition of sin, wonder at forgiveness, and disrupted and graciously restored identity. In revelation, we come up against the transcendent closeness of the God who can never be comprehended, even as he knows us intimately.

This gulf between us and the God who comes close impels us to follow him. 'Where are you staying?' ask the disciples, a perfectly ordinary question with a terrifyingly gracious answer. 'Come and see', Jesus commands, again revealing the divine desire to be in personal relationship with his creatures. 'No one comes to the Father except through me'. But we know too that when the disciples do follow him, they look towards the central revelation of John's gospel, the glory of the cross. 'Where I am going you cannot follow now; but you will afterward'.

We began with three offenses: revelation's irrationality, its lust for power, and its denial of self-determination. But today's gospel renders these offenses trivial. Self-determination is replaced with the possibility of growing into a vision of our true selves revealed by a loving God who knows us better than we ever could ourselves. Revelation reveals our own destructive lusts of power, but is no more and no less than the invitation to see the world as it truly is, sin redeemed by the merciful Lamb, sparkling with the glory of God. And since revelation is not the addition of new facts, it is not in conflict with reason anyway. In fact, it can readily enough be rejected, and often enough is. Being presented with one's true identity, and with the manifold ways we lie to ourselves about it, is not exactly comfortable. We know the truth of the Psalmist's fear of turning away from God towards the desolate pit.

And yet it is certain comfort and delight to behold ourselves in God's loving gaze. For in all this, we see that Jesus is his own revelation. He is the forgiving, just, merciful, Lamb of God. He reveals himself in loving, compassionate, and equitable relationship with us. Come, taste and see that the Lord is good.

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