

*What's really happening*

'What you're seeing and what you're reading is not what is happening!' Thus spoke the President of the United States of America recently, the latest episode in his war upon the media – upon the fake news that he accuses the media of peddling. It's all lies, it's not truthful, it's not what's really happening, he claims.

Well, I'll leave you to your own conclusions about the President's description of the media – but I have to say that while I doubt the President's credentials as Biblical expositor, his catch-phrase is a rather neat description of the Book of Revelation from which we have read this morning: 'what you're seeing... is not what is happening.'

Let's begin with 'what you see...' In the Book of Revelation what you see is the world through the eyes of a man called John, and John was a prisoner of the Roman Empire on a Greek island called Patmos on account of his faith. One feature of the Roman Empire at the time was the growing practice of 'emperor worship' which demanded of all loyal Roman citizens that they confess that Caesar was Lord, and that meant that Christians had to make the fateful choice between Caesar and Christ as Lord. And you couldn't have it both ways, and those who chose Christ were accused of treason and faced persecution, tribulation and death. Hence John's imprisonment. And John's location on Patmos and his condition as a prisoner of course influences what he sees as he looks at the world. I was privileged a few years ago, with Sally, to visit Robben Island and to look into the prison cell where Nelson Mandela was held for 18 of his 27 years of imprisonment. We saw his bed, his table, the barred window through which he looked out at the world. And the South Africa that could be seen through his eyes from that window, in his imagination if not literally, was a brutal place, founded as it was on apartheid. And at times, in his darker moments, Mandela must have wondered when freedom would ever come, when the night would end. Well, the world through the eyes of John of Patmos was also a dark place. His book is full of images of death and destruction. It's a world wrapped in smoke, where wild beasts and strange monsters and dragons run rampant, where false gods and destructive powers sow chaos, and where great swathes of humanity are slaughtered by war and

plague and disease and famine. It's a terrifying picture. And of course the enduring quality of John's vision is that what is described there, with extraordinary imagery and imagination, is not just the world of the Roman Empire of John's day, it's the world of every day and every time, the 21<sup>st</sup> as well as the 1<sup>st</sup> century, viewed from this perspective.

Well, so much for what John sees. However, to return to the saying of the US President – for John, what he sees is not what is really happening. For what is really happening he needs fresh eyes and new vision. Because for John, while it might appear that Caesar is Lord and is ruling his empire, what is really happening is that Jesus is now Lord, and despite what appears he is now reigning in glory. And John's cry, the sigh from his heart, is that Jesus will come and that his kingdom will dawn in fullness and this old tired, order will be gone. Or you could say that John is looking at the world not through the window of some cell in Patmos, not through the window of Robben Island – no, John is looking at the world through the window of heaven, with that perspective. And from there he sees the truth of what is really happening.

So what is really happening? Well, John begins his book with a greeting from the God who he describes as the one 'who was and is and is to come'. And that's great, because with that phrase we are immediately transported back centuries to another land, the land of Egypt, where a group of people are also in captivity – just like John. And to that captive people in Egypt God appears and when asked who he is, which God he is, he replies 'I am who I am and I will be who I will be.' So John's description of God as the one who was and is and is to come is a kind of riff on that, an improvisation, for this God in whose name John pronounces greeting is the same God who lead his people out of captivity and who will one day lead John out of captivity and who one day will lead the world out of captivity!

So that is what is happening: the God of Israel, the God of liberation hasn't gone away. John may be banished into exile and captivity but his God is not. And then John goes on to bring greetings to his readers from Jesus who he describes as 'the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth'. And what an extraordinary thing to say, so provocative, that Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth – ruler of Caesar. John is saying is that what you see is Caesar ruling, what you see is an emperor clothed with all the power and pomp of Rome – but what is really happening is that Jesus is his ruler, the ruler of all kings and emperors. And John goes on and you can see

running through his words this discrepancy between what you see and what is really happening. ‘To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood...’, says John. Wow! That’s something, coming from a prisoner! To the human eye John is not free. He is a prisoner of Rome, a captive on some rocky outcrop. But that is not what is really happening. The truth is that John has been freed from his sins by Christ’s blood - and that is a far deeper liberation.

So John looks at the world, at what is going on around him. But then he looks at Jesus – he lifts his eyes and he looks up to heaven – and he sees what’s really going on. And that is the source of his hope. That is the key to his resilience, whatever his condition.

All of which brings us to today, the final Sunday of the Christian year, the Sunday before Advent and what has been called in recent times ‘Christ the King or ‘The reign of Christ’ Sunday. This was established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI because he was alarmed at what he saw going on around him in the world. He saw the rise of rampant secularism: the decline of Christian belief and the erosion of the church and its influence. He saw the rise of nationalism and dictators and the way people were yielding to them.

Familiar, eh? And so he wanted a special day to proclaim Jesus as King, the reality of Christ’s Lordship that was being eclipsed. And Christ the King Sunday is a way of saying again that what you see is not what is really happening for despite every appearance, Jesus is Lord.

That brings us to Christians, to those of us who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. We are like John on the island of Patmos, part of the same world that he observed in his day. But like him we are called to bear witness to the truth. I’m struck by the way that in our two passages this morning Jesus is referred as a witness. In John’s Gospel Jesus stands before the Roman Governor Pilate at his trial and there is a whole discussion there about truth. And Jesus says, ‘for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth’. And in our Revelation passage Jesus is referred to as ‘the faithful witness’, and it’s the same Greek word that is used for testifying and for bearing witness. And that is our role as those who bear the name of Christ: to testify, to bear witness to the truth: the truth of Christ, the truth of the world, the truth of what is really happening. And how do we do that?

Well, we get one clue in our passage from Revelation what that involves. John says, ‘To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God the Father’, and

note that we are described here as priests. And what is the responsibility of priests? Well, it's to offer up worship: to offer up worship on behalf of the world. And when we gather to worship we are testifying to the truth, to what is happening as opposed to what appears. In worship we proclaim that Christ and not Caesar or any other god or lord rules. In worship we renounce every other god – be it the god of mammon and materialism, or be it the god of violence and war – all the false gods that appear to rule this world and that trample across the pages of the Book of Revelation. In worship we proclaim one God who was and is and is to come and one Lord Jesus Christ. And that is what makes worship such a subversive act and it's what got John banished to the island of Patmos.

So, to conclude: as with Jesus' encounter with Pilate, it all comes down to the question of truth, what we believe to be the deepest truth about the world. Our calling as Christians is to live a truthful life, one that corresponds with the ways things really are, with what is really happening. And worship lies at the heart of that, but it needs to go further and to be carried into our ordinary, everyday lives.

It's about how we choose live.

It's about choosing love over hate.

It's about choosing forgiveness over vengeance.

It's about choosing careless generosity over careful calculation.

It's about seeing people in the light of Christ and not in the shadow of our prejudices and assumptions.

It's about dying to the old, false self that isn't really you at all and rising to a new identity in Christ. Everything else is lies – and I could go on and on.

At its heart its about renouncing every false Lord and every false Caesar that tries to stoke our allegiance and acknowledging only the one who was and is to come, the alpha and the omega. That means learning to live not by what we hear and see and read, but by what is really happening.

In short, it means finding a million ways to say, with John of Patmos, 'Look! He is coming with the clouds – and then we will see him'! Amen.

Almighty and holy God, Ancient of Days,  
Alpha and omega, beginning and end,  
God of time and God of eternity  
who was and is and is to come,  
we praise and bless you sovereign God,  
and we praise and bless the Holy Spirit before your throne  
and Jesus Christ, firstborn from the dead  
and ruler of the kings of the earth.  
We praise you on this day for all your great acts  
in creation and in salvation,  
for your making of all things  
and your making of all things new.  
Forgive us, gracious God, for everything in us  
that resists your rule;  
forgive us for our captivity to other gods and other powers,  
forgive us God for our sins that pierce the  
one who came to save us.

*Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon us...*

O God, in Jesus Christ you have loved us  
and freed us by his blood  
and called us to be a people of worship and praise.  
Grant us grace to live out that calling,  
For we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,  
in whose words we pray together, saying...