AllSaints

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WAKE UP! – The Battle Behind All Battles

Revelation 16:1-18

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This morning we began with worship, because that is the point of Revelation really, to lead us to give thanks to God and to place all things in his hand knowing the challenges that will come to the planet, but at the same time we place ourselves in his loving tender care. Revelation was written to anxious Christians in Asia Minor, and the whole point of it is for them to be reassured that God is on the throne, he is good, he wins in the end, that the Lord Jesus has it, and if we place ourselves into his hands then, 'it is well with our souls'.

Well, was mentioned this morning, the 1914-18 war was supposed to be this 'war that ended all wars'. After an estimated 16 million soldiers and civilians died, countless others physically and psychologically wounded - would you believe that only a couple of decades later even worse followed?

There have been over 250 major conflicts over this last century since. And in 2018, 100 years after the end of the First World War, a designer called produced a startling infographic:

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This shows the duration of the wars over the last 100 years since the end of World War I, and using poppy heads to depict the number of casualties. And this doesn't include the Russia-Ukraine war, or Sudan, or Gaza, or other Middle Eastern conflicts that are still going on today. If it did, the current size of the poppy field on the right-hand side of this graphic would be considerably larger: a wall of red.

And it's so frustrating that although the vast majority of people agree that war is a blight on human flourishing, we still seem unable or unwilling to stop it. Far from solving our problems and making our world a fairer place, our technological progress just looks to be speeding up and automating our methods of self-destruction.

But although wars and conflicts seem to be an inevitable outcome of the fallen state of human nature, we do have to recognize that there are also wider spiritual forces at work in the background.

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The evangelist Billy Graham said this, "God's forces of good and Satan's forces of evil have been engaged in a deadly conflict from the dawn of our history. And unless world leaders and statesmen understand the true nature of this warfare, they will continue to be blind leading the blind."

So, we need to open our eyes to what's really going on in the world.

And Karl Barth, who was a founder of the Confessing Church in Germany, which was an organization that wrote the Barman Declaration, which denounced Nazism in the 1930s, he said this, "Take your Bible and take your newspaper and read both, but interpret your newspapers from your Bible."

And the Bible, of course, is full of beautiful invitations for everybody to step into the grace and forgiveness of God. It is a book of good news through Jesus Christ, but it also contains many explicit warnings for us not to reject his ways or to follow that wide road that leads to destruction. So, it is a beautiful invitation, it is full of grace.

But, it is also full of warning. And today's reading from the book of Revelation comes at the climax of ten chapters warning of dire consequences of humanity's sinfulness and idolatry: the very things we worship that lead us to hurt ourselves, instead of worshipping God.

But chapters 12 to 16 also begin to describe the spiritual forces of evil in the background, which are latterly being uncloaked and being held to account (thankfully!).

As we've seen over the previous weeks John's book is arranged and revealed in sevens. He wrote to these seven churches of ancient Asia Minor to encourage them that God is still working out his purposes despite all the suffering they see around them and the persecution they might be experiencing.

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And he takes imagery from the Old Testament prophets and John describes how Christ himself is the only one who is worthy to open this scroll, the scroll of history depicting the past, the present, and the future of God's creation, sealed with seven seals that are gradually unfurled.

And John then describes seven angels blowing seven trumpets which are warning signs for humanity to take notice, pay attention for us to return to God's ways, to place his values at the heart of our own.

Then last week Andrew described seven characters who appear in the latter chapters of Revelation which symbolize this struggle between God's people and those empires and beastly systems which tries to resist and destroy God's work and his kingdom.

And now this week the apocalyptic warnings reach their crescendo in chapters 16 and 17 with the outpouring of what's known as the seven bowls of God's wrath.

So, these are scary terms, aren't they? It culminates in this final great war of Armageddon. Armageddon is always picked up by Hollywood film directors in many instances, but Armageddon is this place of utter conflict between the Lord and all he stands for. It's all very destructive, unsettling, and it's disastrous. If you want to read those chapters I recommend you do it with your eyes open and your hearts protected.

And just as the trumpet warnings echoed the plagues of Egypt that we read about in Exodus, the bowls of God's wrath again recall that Exodus story and the destruction that Pharaoh and his army experienced when he persisted in belligerent defiance of God.

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And that is the warning in Revelation: **'Don't defy God in our actions or in our attitudes'.**

Except this time instead of just being warnings the bowls of God's wrath actually bring about utter ruin. This outpouring is irreversible. If you pour out a bowl of water on the ground, you can't scoop it back up. It is spilt. It is irreversible. And each of the bowls that we read about represents the destruction of things we rely on for human flourishing.

The first four depict in similar ways to the trumpets: the land, the sea, the rivers, the sky - they're stricken. So, we thought about how ecology suffers when God's people ignore his values.

But also, these things could well be representative of the total breakdown of our environment, our commerce, our resources, our leadership structures. When humanity rejects God's values and sovereignty these things get fundamentally broken and destroyed.

And the final three bowls are more concerned with God's judgment of false spiritualities, of worldly corruption and the wrath that will finally come on Satan's seductive kingdom. And Satan personifies all that in this: what gets called 'the great whore of Babylon'. Some say that we are living in a digital Babylon, that we need to be careful of what we put into our minds and our hearts because it's all around us.

Pope Benedict said this, "The wrath of God," we don't really like saying those terms, "but the wrath of God is a way of saying that I have been living in a way that is contrary to the love that is God. Anyone who begins to live and grow away from God, who lives away from what is good, is turning their life toward wrath."

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And in Romans 1, the apostle Paul wrote this:

And, therefore, God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts."

Romans 1:18, 24

(NIVUK) 18 'The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people… 24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts'…

In other words, the wrath of God becomes apparent when the escalating consequences of sin are no longer restrained or held back, and the time for justice needs to come. **There will be justice and it needs to be done.**

On Tuesday earlier this week, we saw a documentary Naomi Pendle has produced. She's been working on it since 2025 as part of her research, exploring the impact of war and starvation in Sudan. It was screened at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution. Her research at Bath University shows how the politics of war intersects with climate challenges such as El Nino, which doubly compounds the suffering of ordinary people, particularly in places like Sudan.

For example, over the past four decades, the Nuba Mountains region has seen armed conflict and battles just over gold or land that have caused themselves repeated famines. And even though the area is highly fertile, they could be a food/feeding exporter, Instead, these people are on the brink of starvation just because of the selfishness of others. Those who went to see it on Tuesday commented to me, "It makes you angry. It makes you cry out for justice".

And the bowls of God's wrath are not only filled with "the groans of creation," as God's Word says, but also the prayers of the saints and the martyrs down the century who are asking:

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Revelation 6:10

(NIVUK) 10 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'

"How long, Lord, till we see this put right?"

Perhaps we are insulated too much from what is tragically going on in the world around us. Perhaps we would be more crying out with them: "How long, Lord, till judgment comes?"

And our passage in Revelation 16 says it's not only our human nature that brings catastrophe to the world, but it is people coming under the influence of the forces of evil.

John writes this,

Revelation 16:13-14

(NIVUK) 13 'Then I saw three impure spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. 14 They are demonic spirits that perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty'.

So, the dragon, the beast, and the false prophets, these are an unholy trinity: an unholy trinity of evil influencers, diabolically opposed to God's sovereignty and will. And the devil, in his scheming, looks for state sponsorship, sometimes dresses as an angel of light, offering seemingly miraculous cures to the world's ills. But we have to be on our guard because it's all too easy to slide away from trusting God, looking to created things to solve our problems, instead of actually looking to God for the answers to how our world should be, for our comfort and our security.

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But even in our passage, it gives us clues how we should respond.

In my Bible, the words of verse 15 are in red. In other words, it points out what Jesus is saying. And even in the midst of this passage, Jesus says this:

Revelation 16:15

(NIVUK) 15 'Look, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and remains clothed, so as not to go naked and be shamefully exposed.'

And this reminds us a bit of Jesus' parable of the ten bridesmaids in Matthew 25. The ten bridesmaids, keeping their lamps alight, looking out for the wedding party to arrive. And it says that we need to stay spiritually alert and not be caught napping.

Now if you are at all concerned today whether your eyes are open to what is really going on in the world and want to prayerfully be alert and discerning about what you see, then be assured that's the first step to remaining awake. Just being concerned about it at all is the first step to being awake. And the good news of the gospel is that we can be reconciled to God right now. We can call on his name. We can call on the name of Jesus to help us and save us. We can be filled with the Spirit of God to keep us spiritually fired up and alert and discerning of what is really going on in the world around us. That is our privilege. That is the invitation of the Bible: "Come be reconciled to God". "Be alert. Be awakened to all his goodness for us".

But this parable also warns us not to be caught napping. Pete Greig preached about the urgency of this parable at the summer festivals this year and encouraged everyone to actually prepare for war whilst praying and interceding for peace in our time. And he noted that in the parable it seems really unfair in the way that Jesus told it, that the bridesmaids who had got prepared and kept oil in their lamps weren't able to share it with those who ran out. It seems unfair to us. We would have shared it out.

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But Pete pointed out that the oil represents that personal connection and intimacy with God. The oil of the Holy Spirit in that parable is our personal connection with God. That anointing, that holiness, the things that cannot be shared because they are intrinsic to us and our response to what God is doing. You can't just give away something that is personal to you.

So being awake means prioritizing our own devotion to God in the private place. Nobody can do that for you. We can only do that for ourselves.

It's also where our sense of peace and authority are cultivated in that private place with the Lord. And so Jesus' words in red tell us to remain awake just like that parable. Keep awake. Keep our devotion and intimacy with the Lord as our priority.

But he also says to the readers to remain clothed, not to be ashamed.

It reminds me of a time when Mims and I were helping to lead an Alpha weekend. Somebody set off the fire alarm in the middle of the night. We had very young children with us at the time. All I can say is that the rest of the Alpha crew and the guests got quite an eyeful as Mims bundled out of our room with children under her arms with not a lot of time to fully dress. I guess the lesson of that occasion was just that we should anticipate urgent action sometimes being required.

Now I mentioned the armour of God a couple of weeks ago: the belt of truth and the helmet of salvation, these things that we should clothe ourselves with. But Paul wrote that we also need to clothe ourselves with God's garments in Colossians 3, his letter to the church at Colossae.

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Colossians 3:5-6

(NIVUK) 5 'Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming'.

In other words: 'put away the rags of wrath' as I'm going to call them from now on.

What should be done instead?

Colossians 3:12-14

(NIVUK) 12 'Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity'.

So, in the middle of this scariest of Bible passages, that's what the Lord Jesus encourages us to do. Wake up, remain awake, and clothe yourselves with Godly garments, not rags of wrath.

And all this calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints. So, whatever happens throughout history and the remains of our time here on this planet, we need to patiently endure. And as we look to the Lord, as we keep our eyes open, we can be sure he will give us all that we need. In fact, he's the one who comes to bring us the clothes that we want to put on: those clothes of Godly garments.

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And so, life may be challenging in the future. I'm not going to promise you a wonderful, jolly Christian life. What I am going to promise you is that the Lord is with us whatever happens. We stand with him. If we want him to be ruler of our lives, he promises that he will be. And then we can truthfully say with the writer of that hymn, 'It's well with my soul'.

And if we've got those that we are praying for, we want them to say that as well. We keep praying and we keep trusting that he is just, that he is good, that he is loving. And we keep praying that they too will put on those godly garments and put away those rags of wrath.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we just thank you that we can trust in you. That, Lord, you encourage us to keep awake and keep clothed. Lord, and so today we want to put on your godly garments and put away, take off those rags of wrath. We pray that you will open our eyes to your goodness and your grace. And that, Lord, even things that make us fearful, we will place before you and instead receive the peace that transcends all understanding. That, Lord, you would guard our hearts and our minds. Lord, may we then be filled with your Holy Spirit to be peacemakers. You promise that we'll be blessed. So come Holy Spirit today. May we take these warnings seriously. May we exhort others to open their eyes and be clothed with your goodness and your grace.

Amen.

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