

REVELATION 1:1-8  
ON THE SIDE OF TRUTH?

Things are tough. I was part of a conversation recently in which we came to the conclusion that in my 30 years of ministry, this is the hardest time I've known for the mission of the Church in Scotland: people seem to have a poorer view of the Church than ever; people are more prepared to attack the Christian church and Christian faith publicly than ever before; many are more resistant to take up the invitation to join the Church or come to some of the things we organise. But then, things are tough for people individually; many people have stories to tell. Some of you are wrestling with illness, or you're supporting someone else who is ill; there are lots of people who are dealing with big issues of health and well-being; I hear story after story at the moment! Donald is married with two young children; this time last year he was made redundant from his job as a sales manager and last week had his umpteenth job interview, but is still out of work; again that story can be repeated over and over. Family life can be difficult at times and lots of families are struggling just to survive. Others are snowed under with the relentlessness of life and going from one thing to another. For some people it is not even just one of these things, but lots of them pile up on top of each other.

How does the Church help people to survive these tough times or deal with difficult things? These tough times stretch our faith; they can make people question their faith or perhaps even more likely, simply neglect their faith for a time, park it, because other things are more important and get in the way of nurturing faith. There are all kinds of answers to the question about how the Church can help, and how we can support one another; the best answers all begin with a sense of compassion for one another; walk in the other person's shoes for a day, see how it feels and that will shape our attitudes to one another and should help us to find compassion and grace in all of our dealings with one another. Prayer changes the way we think: as we pray for someone, we do begin to feel something of their pain. The Bible has another answer to the question about how the Church can support people when life is tough and that answer we're going to explore today.

The book of Revelation is fascinating. It is such a complicated book in some ways because of all the pictures and images that it contains later, but in another way it is a book with such a simple message. It was written to Churches who are struggling: they were losing their way; there were issues of morale; they were losing their enthusiasm for the faith; they were tired and weary of the struggle; they were facing persecution and martyrdom; the Christians are finding life tough. These Christians were living in the first Century Roman Empire, in what we now call Turkey, Asia Minor it was then. They were being persecuted for their faith and the leader of the Church, the apostle John has been exiled onto an island in the Aegean Sea, the island of Patmos. Revelation is given to the Church to help these Christians hold onto their faith in these tough times, to persevere in the faith and not give up. We find it hard enough to understand this book because of all its imagery and pictures, but one picture above all shows us everything we need to know.

*"The revelation..." (Revelation 1:1a)* Jesus is at the centre; it is all about Jesus. This revelation about Jesus has come from God to show us what Jesus is like. The one thing about Jesus that Revelation shows us – Jesus is King *"the ruler..." (1:5)* We'll look at this in a little more detail in a moment, but this is what the Bible always does for the people of God in trouble – "see how great God is; see how big Jesus is!" This is not something

that John made up to make people feel better; but this is something that God has shown him; God has revealed something of Himself to help His people live out their faith. Equally, the Bible never tells us to pull our socks up when we're in trouble; it always equips the people of God to live in a hostile world or a troubled life by saying "see how great and good God is; see the greatness of God and the depth of His love". Some of these Christians would be killed for their faith, martyrs under the persecution of Rome; the churches are struggling against all kinds of strange teachings and was in danger of losing its way, and losing its enthusiasm. John says: "Jesus is King; see how great God is; take heart and persevere!"

The heart of this prologue to Revelation is the greeting: "*To the...*" (1:4,5) There is something about God, something about Jesus and something about us in these words.

**1. Something about God:** see how John describes God "*Who is...*" (1:4) How many times are here! There is the present, the past and the future, all held in this phrase; the whole of time is here and if you missed it he comes back to it later: "*I am...*" (1:8) God is the A-Z of everything! There is something here about the changelessness of God; God is always there; God doesn't fade away; even when our circumstances change and when times are good or times are tough, God stays same. "In the terrible days in which he was writing John stayed his heart on the changelessness of God." (Wm Barclay) I was hearing last week about Scripture Union in Zimbabwe: SU is having to make all of its staff redundant because it no longer has the money to pay them; and then is having to sell off its HQ building to pay the redundancy money. General Director, a man called Leonard, was at an SU International Conference in Malaysia and the phrase that was quoted to him was this: "don't let your circumstances dictate your vision." God has not gone away; God is still with us; God still loves His people; God is still at work in the world and we are still His people; hold on to the changelessness of God even when everything around us is changing.

**2. Something about Jesus:** He is described in three ways: "*He is...*" (1:5) Jesus is King, indeed King over kings and this whole notion of how great Jesus is will pervade the whole of Revelation and when we grasp that greatness our faith is stronger. But John takes us back a step: before the greatness of Jesus was declared, something else happened: He was a faithful witness and that takes us back to Jerusalem some 60 years earlier to Jesus' conversation with Pilate: "*are you...*" (John 18:33) and kingship is the topic of the whole conversation. Pilate is astonished that this person standing in front of him has claims to be king; he had expected someone with hatred in his eyes and fighting men prepared to die fighting for their king; but instead he sees Jesus, an innocent man who is being lied about and betrayed. "*My kingdom...*" (18:36) Jesus came as a witness to the truth, to the faithfulness of God, and the reliability of God's promises and that led Him to Calvary, the faithful witness who died for His faith. This faithful witness knows what it is like to suffer and die; this faithful witness is raised and is now "*ruler of kings of earth.*" (1:5) The greatness of Jesus is forged in the suffering of Calvary, a reliable, faithful Saviour.

**3. Something about us:** "*Grace and...*" (Revelation 1:4,5) "Grace and peace" – how often these two words are used to sum up the whole of God's blessing! Grace – God loves us even constantly and even when we don't deserve His love. Peace – this is more than the absence of conflict, but it is about our whole well-being. This is the blessing of God for us. "Grace" is the heart of the gospel – "no grace, no gospel" (Moffatt). God has loved us and will go on loving us; because of His love for us, Jesus has died and we are set free from our sins and we are made new people, we are the children of God, we are

the people of God, we are His kingdom, we are called to serve. "Peace" carries with it the Old Testament idea of Shalom, a huge word, holding much more than we think when we use the word 'peace'. For us, peace means either the absence of conflict, or a nice warm feeling inside us; but this notion of peace is much bigger and greater and more about our whole well-being; God deals with our whole person and makes us whole; it starts off with being at peace with God, reconciled by Jesus on the cross and then it is about our relationships with other people healed and then about ourselves and the good sense of who we are and what God has done for us. God has given us grace and peace; these are His gifts and blessings to us and nothing can take these blessings away from us; we are a people greatly blessed.

Now all of this is meant to give us courage in our faith and life. To people who are struggling with life and for whom faith is hard, we say: God is always same; He never goes away; He is always with us. To people who are struggling with life and for whom faith is hard we say: Jesus is King who has everything in His hands, king of our whole life and times; this king once suffered and died for us; He knows how we feel and is able to help us. To people who are struggling with life and for whom faith is hard we say: we are people whom God has greatly blessed, filled with grace and peace in abundance and nothing can take these gifts and blessings away from us. This is what God is like; this is Jesus; this is what God has done for us. We should take courage from all of this; these great truths are meant to give us courage, to help us in our faith, to make us stronger, to equip us to live life and deal with difficult things. We rely on the God who is faithful!

This is a grand picture and one that gives us life, faith and courage as we grasp it. Mind you, we are often more like Pilate, struggling to come to terms with what is staring him in the face. He sees Jesus; he is told that Jesus claims to be King and can't quite get his head round it. "Can you really be a king?" "Where is your kingdom?" He struggles to come to terms with Jesus; yet he knows two things – Jesus is being manipulated by His enemies; Jesus is innocent of all crimes. But this claim of kingship is the only way by which the Jews can get Pilate's attention, as a threat to Caesar and so they bend his ear and Jesus is crucified. Pilate comes across as a troubled soul, not quite sure of what he's mixed up in and not dealing with it very well. Yet, he sees Jesus, the King whose kingship can't be destroyed; the One who came to bear witness to the truth and who lived it, the faithful witness, reliable, doing the will of God to the end, no matter what.

We struggle to make all of this fit together at times. We like the grand assertions of the Bible, that God is great and changeless, that Jesus is king who loves us; that grace and peace are ours and the blessing of God is for us. We like these and we want to be able to make them, but sometimes we struggle to make these big affirmations of faith when life is tough. We want to have the faith that makes these great affirmations, but struggle to make them for ourselves; we admire people whose faith is sure and unshaken by life. Yet all of this can fit together; God is changeless, Jesus is King, we are His people and grace and peace are His gifts to us. Nothing can take that away; no matter how tough life is or will be or has been, nothing can take away the greatness of God. He is the A-Z of everything; Jesus is the King who loves us and has laid down His life for us; the Spirit of God lives in us and we are people greatly blessed. Take this away; consider these great truths; listen to what Jesus has to say; believe Him; even if you find it hard, even if you struggle, believe Him. Find the courage to believe and continue to believe.