

THE TWO WITNESSES

Revelation 11:1-13

So this week we're continuing our sermon series from Revelation. Last week Giles explained to us that chapters 6 to 19 of Revelation are John's vision of what has happened, what is happening and what will happen between the resurrection of Christ and his second coming. This vision is not an historical account set out in chronological order, it's in picture language and is highly symbolic with a lot of the symbolism drawn from OT themes as you'll see in the sermon today. So we need to remember the rest of our Bible as we look at Revelation. John's vision is a set of views of different things, or often different aspects of the same things, which all overlap in time. As Giles put it they're in parallel.

We see this in our passage this morning which is symbolic of what is happening and what will happen regarding the body of Christ, the witnessing church. This passage is both prophetic and highly symbolic and in my view is one of the most important passages in Revelation. It is a crucial passage which will richly repay us for coming to grips with it, so I particularly urge you to open your Bibles at page [***] so that you can follow it with me as we study it together.

Last week we heard about the seven trumpets, today's part of John's vision comes between the sixth and seventh trumpets in the text – but as we've already seen we shouldn't interpret that as fixing these events to a particular time. It also comes after the revelation of chapter 10 verses 9 and 10 where John has participated in his vision for the first time by eating a small scroll that was sweet to the taste but which made the stomach sour and has been told to prophesy again. John now participates again as he is given a measuring rod, look at verses 1 to 3:

“I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshippers there. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has

been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." (Revelation 11:1-3 NIV)

So John is given a “reed like a measuring rod” and told to measure the Temple enclosure, but not the outer court. Here it’s interesting to note that hard reeds like bamboo grew in the Jordan valley and these were rigid enough to be used as measuring rods between eight and twenty eight feet long. In my view the Temple and the outer court represent the church, the body of Christian believers, from two different perspectives. Certainly the Temple cannot be taken literally because the Temple had been destroyed many years ago by the time that John was writing. We are told that the church will be kept safe from demonic assault (as is symbolised by the measurement which marks off what belongs to God). Yet the church, and us as part of the body of Christ, will suffer at the hands of an unbelieving world. So the church is protected, not against suffering and death, but against spiritual assault. This is the bitter sweet experience of the small scroll eaten by John that we just referred to. This measurement of the Temple is a symbolic action. Biblical prophets often used symbolic actions. For example, Ezekiel dug through a wall and carried out his belongings as a symbol of Israel’s coming exile.

John is told to exclude the outer court from measurement, so they are also excluded from protection and given over to persecution. Many scholars think that this outer court symbolises those members of the church who profess to be part of the body, but don’t really have a sound faith. But, in the opinion of other scholars and also in my view, it really represents the church, the body of believers, viewed from a different perspective. So, on that view, the difference between the inner and outer courts shows us the limits placed on worldly persecution in these last days. The church may be physically decimated but the real source of life cannot be touched – as we shall see when we come to look at the resurrection of the two witnesses mentioned in verse 3.

The time period of 42 months, which is also given as 1,260 days, recalls the period of Jewish suffering under the despotic King Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC and when John was writing this had become a standard Jewish symbol of a limited period of time during which evil is allowed free rein. We shouldn't see it as a literal reference to a time of three and one half years. The periods of worldly antagonism, divine protection and the final witnesses are simultaneous. We are already in a period where Christians and the church are increasingly under persecution. In Pakistan or the Middle East you may well be killed because of your Christian faith, in England you may well be passed over for a job if you wear a visible sign of your Christian faith such as a cross.

So, let's move on to look at what the two witnesses mentioned in verse 3 do in a bit more detail. Look at verses 3 to 6:

“And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.” These are the two olive trees and the two lamp-stands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.” (Revelation 11:3-6 NIV)

The witnesses appear to be modeled after Moses and Elijah. We see in verses 5 and 6 that they have the power, like Elijah, to consume their enemies with fire (2 Kings 1:10ff.) and to shut up the sky so that it will not rain (1 Kings 17:1), and like Moses they can turn the waters into blood (Exodus 7:14–18) and strike the earth with every kind of plague (Exodus 8:12) as Moses did before the Israelites left Egypt. But in my view these witnesses are symbolic of the witness of the whole church in these end times, rather than being two individuals. The reason why we are presented with two witnesses is probably because Jewish Law required a second witness to make testimony valid, the testimony of a single witness was not enough. Although it's also possible that John was thinking of the two faithful churches of

Smyrna and Philadelphia in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 or the two OT figures who never died, Enoch and Elijah.

In any event, the two witnesses represent God's gracious last warning to the world to repent and turn to Christ. So the church today must call a pagan world to repentance. The witnesses are clad in sackcloth because for the Jews this was the garment of penitence, repentance and mourning. The church is powerful only when it is repentant. A comfortable easy church has no power to stir the world. In verse 4 the witnesses are likened to two lampstands and two olive trees. This description is based on Zechariah's vision recorded in chapter 4 of his prophecy, where verse 6 tells us " 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty". So John is saying that the power of the church for powerful and effective witness comes from the Holy Spirit.

Verse 5 tells about the protection of the witnesses before we're told of their activities. That confirms and emphasises that God will keep his people, his church, under His protection until their witness has been completed. The fire coming from their mouths reminds us both that the words of a prophet can be like fire and also of Elijah's encounter with the emissaries of King Azariah where Elijah's words "flared like a torch".

As soon as their ministry is fulfilled, the witnesses are no longer protected from physical harm, look at verses 7 to 10:

"Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on earth." (Re 11:7-10 NIV)

The witnesses are killed by the beast that comes up from the abyss – Satan. The use of the word "attack" or "make war" in verse 7 is one

of the things that lead me to conclude that the witnesses represent a body of people – the church – rather than individuals, as I said earlier.

The bodies of the martyred witnesses are left unburied, which was an enormous indignity for the Jews and shows the pagan world's scorn for the church which has called that pagan world to repentance. Verse 8 seems to speak of the death of the witnesses being in Jerusalem – the great city where the Lord was crucified – but that doesn't seem to be what John is saying here. The scriptures never liken Jerusalem to Egypt. Elsewhere in the book of Revelation, references to the great city are references to Rome, but these references to Rome are really because in John's day the Roman Empire was seen as the Antichrist or Satan. Here the "great city" is symbolic. It's not an actual city; indeed it's not a specific physical location at all, but rather civilised man in organised community and in rebellion against God and under the sway of Satan. Spiritually it is Sodom and Egypt; it's sin; it is the reason why Christ had to go to the cross. The three and a half days for which the witnesses are left unburied recalls the three and a half months of their witness, but is a much shorter period.

To pagans, Christian prophets are always troubling; remember the reaction of King Ahab to Elijah he called him "the troubler of Israel". So it should be no surprise to us that we read in verse 10 that the pagan world was overjoyed by the death of the witnesses. Surely this period whilst the witnesses lie dead parallels the period between the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, because we now see that the witnesses are resurrected – look at verse 11:

"But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them." (Revelation 11:11 NIV)

The rejoicing of the pagan world is cut short as God resurrects his people. The breath of God entering is reminiscent of God breathing life into the dry bones in the valley of the dry bones envisioned by Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 37. Here we are also reminded of what John had written in chapter 2 of Revelation "Be faithful, even to the

point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

Indeed in my view much of the book of Revelation has strong parallels with the life of Christ. The murder of the church, the murder of God’s witnesses, was the world’s last resort – what can it then do against those who rise up from the dead? Please note that the witnesses were not allowed to preach after their resurrection. A time will come when it is too late to repent and turn to Christ *emphasise*. The resurrection of the church shows clearly that it is God who possesses ultimate authority over life and death. As Giles told us last week, the whole of Revelation emphasises that God is on his throne and in control.

The witnesses are now summoned. Look at verse 12:

“Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.” (Revelation 11:12 NIV)

They are summoned by a loud voice from heaven and ascend in full view of their startled enemies.

As the witnesses are taken up there is a great earthquake – look at verse 13:

“At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.” (Revelation 11:13 NIV)

Ezekiel predicted that a great earthquake would precede the end (Ezekiel 38:19-20) and Zechariah says that the Mount of Olives will be split in two at this time (Zechariah 14:4). The curtain of the Temple was torn in two at the time of the crucifixion, now the Mount of Olives is rent in two before the second coming of Christ. This earthquake is both a literal physical event and also symbolic of the enormous upheaval at this time. Some scholars have interpreted the repentance of the survivors as supportive of universalism – the salvation of all mankind. But, the doctrine of universalism is contrary to the clear teaching of scripture and also specifically contrary to the

teaching of John in Revelation, where he says in both chapters 9 and 13 that much of mankind will worship Satan.

So what have we learned this morning? We see that the Church, the body of Christ, has been placed in total and unalterable opposition to an unbelieving world. Whilst it is the time for the Church to witness it will be protected from spiritual attack, but not from persecution by a hostile pagan world. This passage is a call to repentance and faith. Let us all be faithful witnesses for Christ during this age, let us call those around us who do not know Christ to repentance and faith. Before the end times the Church will seem to be overcome, but will be raised up by God and will ascend into heaven. If we remember the parable of the ten virgins we see that we do not and cannot know exactly when the end times will come. So let us always be prepared and turn to Christ NOW and bring others to Christ NOW whilst there is yet still time, whilst the witness of the Church is empowered by God to deliver God's last warnings to a pagan world. For a time will come when he will call those who are his people to ascend into heaven and we don't know what will happen to those who are not his people – but I expect it won't be pleasant. So if you have never turned to Christ and accepted him as your Lord, or if you're not sure you have done that or if you just want to renew your commitment to him, then I urge you to turn to Christ now in repentance and faith in his resurrection power and acknowledge him with your lips and accept him in your hearts as your Lord and master. All those who genuinely turn to Christ will enjoy the blessing of being raised up to heaven as part of the body of God's people. Let's make sure that we enjoy that blessing and bring as many others as possible into the kingdom as well.