

"Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea."

A sermon upon the dedication of the restored altar reredos at St Marylebone parish church. March 3rd 2024.

Without a decent modern commentary, the Apocalypse – the Revelation to John – can seem pretty baffling. The language and imagery we encounter there appears alien to our 21st-century minds and consequently the book is difficult to engage with profitably. Other than the few passages we get to hear in the course of the liturgical lectionary, its material is probably the most unfamiliar to us in the New Testament. Nevertheless, apocalyptic it is a literary genre with a long tradition in Judaism with powerful examples to be found in the Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel and in the Apocrypha in I Enoch and 4 Ezra.

A major characteristic of the Book of Revelation is the extraordinary vividness of the visions it describes. It is almost as if the texts were written as verbal artwork. The original audience – more often hearers than readers – may well have been intended to visualise what was being described and in so doing to find themselves caught up in the visions they contained. For our medieval forebears this visual approach was the key to accessing the precious insights they believed were granted, granted to the Evangelist, St John, in his exile on the island of Patmos. Hence in this country alone many examples of illustrated Apocalypses survive from what must have been an

enormous number before the destruction that accompanied the Reformation. There are glorious, illuminated manuscripts from as early as the beginning of the 13th century, only waning in popularity some two hundred years later. The cloisters of Norwich cathedral have over fifty roof bosses carved with Apocalypse scenes. The Chapter House of Westminster Abbey is adorned with wall paintings and texts taken from the Apocalypse. Perhaps the best and most spectacular of all is the great east window of York Minster with eighty-one panels of brilliantly coloured and painted stained glass depicting the visions of Revelation in amazing detail.

As a post-graduate art historian at York's Centre for Medieval Studies and later as a member of the York committee of the Cathedrals' Fabric Commission for England, I was privileged to get to know this great window "close up and personal" – as they say – first *in situ* from the scaffolding, and then panel by panel in the workshop of the York Glaziers' Trust as it was carefully restored and conserved.

Among my favourite panels in this extraordinary visualisation, this giant, coloured glass, cartoon strip, is a triptych, three adjacent panels, depicting the Almighty enthroned in a heaven of cerulean blue, surrounded by the twenty-four elders, seated and crowned on the left and kneeling and casting down their crowns on the right. What always catches my eye amidst all this splendour is at the bottom left hand corner of the central panel – a small, open trapdoor through which St

John gazes upon the majesty of God. *"I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!"* The visionary looks, as it were, through a prosaic trapdoor in the roof of the physical world he inhabits and is given a glimpse of heaven, a place which *"has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light."* For John, the brilliance of the throne room is overwhelming. He sees the glimmer of crystals and fiery red colours in the presence on the throne, jasper and carnelian, and a rainbow around it that shines with the sparkle of an emerald. There is a sea of glass like crystal before the throne and on its shore are seated the elders. Also around the throne are four living creatures. They have the faces of a lion, an ox, and human, and an eagle in flight.

As I have already hinted, these images are not unique to John. He is recalling with great clarity the vivid language of the first chapter of Ezekiel and the seventh chapter of Daniel. This tradition of Jewish apocalyptic literature upon which he draws is concerned to demonstrate that there is a profound connection between the events taking place on earth and those taking place in heaven where God dwells. This is a rich field for scholars and commentators who want us to see in many of John's images allusions to historical events taking place in the last years of the first century, notably the existential crisis for Christians caused by the persecution initiated by the Emperor Domitian. Through this particular lens many of the otherwise opaque images can be seen to refer to the evil that is Rome and all that it stands for,

and to the qualities required of the Christian community in remaining faithful in a time of crisis.

But these historical allusions are not the reason why in the late 1880s the painter John Crompton decorated the half dome of the newly built apse of this church with his interpretation of the vision St John saw through his trapdoor, the majestic scene described in chapter 4 of his Revelation. Advised, no doubt, by the churchwarden-architect, Thomas Harris, and the Rector, William Barker, who commissioned the work on the chancel, he was concerned to demonstrate the profound connection between the holy rites taking place on this particular piece of God's earth and those taking place in heaven where the Almighty dwells in majesty. I can imagine a conversation between the three of them in the newly-built vestry: Says the Rector, "I want something that reflects Isaiah 66.1: *"Thus says the Lord: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting-place?"* Or perhaps Psalm 132.7: *Let us go to his dwelling-place; let us worship at his footstool.*" "Ah, yes", says the churchwarden, "Did not that fellow John Stainer at St Paul's write a splendid anthem recently, *I saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple?* That is exactly the sort of thing we want." The artist smiles and makes a mental note, "yes, Revelation 4 is the way to fill the space admirably."

Joking apart, these are very good iconographic prompts to inspire the decoration of the apse. Here we can join St John as

he gazes into heaven and we are brought to our knees like the elders round the throne, *"Lost in wonder love and praise."* Here before our eyes is God's heavenly throne room. He sits on his throne, worshipped by angels, elders and heavenly beings including the four "living creatures" that John described in some detail. In our worship here we are also linked via this vision to the Old Testament descriptions of the desert tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple: lamps are blazing before the throne; incense depicts the prayers of God's people; and there should be a sea of glass, more perfect than the bronze one in the temple of Jesus' day.

But more is going on than this. St Marylebone Parish Church in which we worship today, albeit built in the early nineteenth century, stands in the tradition of the post-Great Fire, parish churches of the City of London, rebuilt in the late seventeenth century under the supervision of Sir Christopher Wren and the talented architects in his drawing office. His buildings mirrored the theology of his day, the Church of England as a reformed Catholic church reflected the English attempt to keep the main threads of sacramental life but with a new twist of being able to hear and see everything which went on in the church building. Wren designed and built auditory churches where all could hear, where all could see, and where no member of the community would be more than thirty feet from the action. Admittedly, as originally furnished, the interior of this building must have seemed an extraordinary clutter of box pews, tiers of

galleries and a very dominant organ case, but the radical reordering in the 1880s, on sound ecclesiological principles, revealed how it deserves to take its place in the tradition of Wren, Hawksmoor and, above all, the James Gibbs of St Martin in the Fields.

Contrary to the widely held view that the Church of England of the long 18th century was torpid, lethargic, protestant, Erastian and liturgically dull, there was an important strain within it which was intellectually lively, theologically sophisticated, sacramentally sound, and its understanding of the Prayer Book liturgy was based on a close study of the early Fathers of the Church. A single example will suffice: The best-selling Prayer Book commentary of the period was Charles Wheatley's *A Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer*, first published in 1710 and still in print in 1890, had as its frontispiece an image which is a direct progenitor of what we see before us here today. A soberly clad clergyman directs an enquirer into the chancel of a Wren-like church where serried ranks of worshippers kneel before an altar at which a priest in surplice and hood is celebrating the Holy Communion. Above, surrounded by a glory-filled cloud inhabited by cherubs, Christ the Great High Priest offers his eternal sacrifice of himself at the altar of heaven. The implication of this is clear – the worship offered here on earth is one with that eternally offered in heaven. The bloodless sacrifice offered here is that of the Lamb who has been slain once for all and remains for ever interceding

on our behalf in the immediate presence of the Father in the celestial Holy of Holies. And here on earth we partake of his resurrected Body, and we drink the new life of his love by sharing in the cup of blessing, the chalice of his Blood. So at the heart of the Book of Revelation is this story, the same gospel story that echoes throughout the entire New Testament, a story about a slain Lamb victorious over death and evil and a God who makes everything new. On this firm foundation was built the eucharistic faith and practice of the 19th-century Tractarians of which the apse furnishing and decoration we see before us today is a direct expression.

All this – which I hope has not been too sleep inducing - is by way of explaining why it has seemed so very important to bring back to completeness John Crompton and Thomas Harris's earthly representation of the heavenly throne room beneath which this community celebrates the sacraments of the New Covenant. And, because we should never be afraid to bring to the altar the very best that our own generation can offer, it was equally important to complete this reredos by the hand of a contemporary artist of vision and skill.

There was no question of restoring the flaking and frankly boring post-war cartouche and sacred monogram or of installing a pastiche version of John Crompton's original space-filling rows of red cherub heads. A new commission was essential. A short list of contemporary artists was drawn up, each with a track

record of producing art for sacred spaces, and three of them were invited to submit detailed proposals for what should fill the tympanum space. The brief was simply to supply what the artist thought was missing. All three produced interesting work characterised by a dynamism, a sense of movement, that is perhaps a missing element in Crompton's rather static panels. Sophie Hacker's successful proposal stood out for a number of reasons, not least that it was uncompromisingly contemporary while being sensitive to the context in which it was to appear. The confidence placed in Sophie by the selection panel has been rewarded by a finished work far surpassing the initial proposal in quality and suitability for the space. So now, as you see, beneath the heavenly throne is a swirling cosmic sea, a vortex of divine love, drawing into salvation the whole created and uncreated order.

*Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim, falling down before thee,
Which wert and art and evermore shall be. Amen*