

Sermon - robes and earthquakes

Based on: Acts 16.16–34; Revelation 22.12–22; John 17.20–26

Alpha and Omega

- We have arrived at the final week of the Easter season - a season of celebrating the final act in Christ's demonstration of God's love, compassion and forgiveness - and the new life that arises from that.
- We acknowledge Christ's ascension into that spiritual dimension we call heaven, where he reigns forever as king - King of kings and Lord of lords.
- In the Revelation to John, this ultimate triumph of good over evil, love over hate, and light over darkness is described in dramatic symbolism and metaphor, and it ends with the passage we heard earlier this morning.
- Jesus describes his absolute sovereignty in these familiar phrases:
'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.' (Revelation 22.13)
- He adds further:
'I am the root and the descendant of David.' (Revelation 22.16)
- In this he references the great King David - acknowledged by God's people to be their greatest earthly king - and Jesus describes himself both as King David's descendant, that is, as the one who builds on what was established under David, and as the root - that is, the primary source of what made King David great.

Washed robes

- Amongst various warnings and blessings that are revealed to John the Divine, and that he writes in these final words of our New Testament scriptures, he records the following blessing:
Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. (Revelation 22.14)
- It is helpful to remind ourselves to the two other references to washing one's robe in the Revelation to John.
- Listen to how the book starts:
*John to the seven churches that are in Asia:
Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.
To him who loves us and washed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.
Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.
So it is to be. Amen.
'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. (Revelation 1.4-8)*
- In this, you can hear how John starts and ends his book with similar concepts and phrasing.

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- The other reference to washed robes is found in chapter 7, where John writes:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;

the sun will not strike them,

nor any scorching heat;

for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,

and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,

and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.' (Revelation 7.9, 13-17)

- So this metaphor of having one's robe washed in the blood of the Lamb, and thereby made completely clean is a powerful way of describing how, by turning oneself to Christ to receive forgiveness of sins and then follow his way of sacrificial love, we can enjoy that purity of heart and mind, that enables us to participate properly in the heavenly life that is described here.

Paul and Silas' ordeal

- Now sometimes while we might find the kind of images and rhetoric such as the ones John uses to be evocative and inspirational, we do not necessarily comprehend how this might apply in practical terms.
- However, when we think about today's story from the book of Acts, then here is a very tangible description of people coming through a great ordeal, of being able to rise above physical discomfort and rejoice in worshipping God, and encouraging others to have their sins washed clean in the blood of the Lamb.
- So picking up on that story that takes place when Paul and his companions first go to Philippi in Macedonia, we hear of them being accosted by a slave-girl with a spirit of divination.
- It is interesting to note that this spirit, when in the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in Paul and the others, compels the girl to proclaim a spiritual truth: *'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.'* (Acts 16.17)
- Nevertheless, even though what it says is true, it is disruptive to Paul's missional work, and so he delivers the girl of this malevolent spirit through the power of the name of Jesus.
- But this healing deliverance then comes at enormous cost to Paul and company: they are seized, dragged to the magistrates, stripped naked, severely flogged, and put in prison where they are placed in the innermost cell with their feet fastened in stocks.
- What an ordeal!
- They must have been in much pain and ongoing discomfort: probably cold, unable to shift into a more comfortable position, and with unknown consequences ahead of them.

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Prayer and hymns

- And what do they do?
- They pray and sing hymns to God.
- I'm sure their prayers probably included asking God to give them comfort and hope, but they would also have been praying for those who had beaten and imprisoned them.
- Following Jesus' teaching and example, they would have prayed for forgiveness for those who had abused them.
- And they sang!
- They sang hymns of praise, and worship, and thanksgiving.
- What an amazing witness to the other prisoners.
- Clearly Paul and company had access to something that brought light to their situation of darkness, hope to their situation of despair, and strength to their situation of weakness.
- And in their prayers and hymns they proclaimed what it was that enabled them to not only withstand, but to overcome their ordeal.

The saved jailer

- And then, as if what they had already experienced was not enough, there was an earthquake!
- One so violent that locked chains and doors fly open, and the prisoners are able to escape.
- The jailer assumes that the prisoners have all run off and that he will be held to account with very unpleasant consequences, but Paul reassures him that they have not taken advantage of the situation, so great is their trust that the Lord God is ultimately in control of the situation.
- The jailer recognises that Paul and Silas have something that enables them to rise above the challenges of this world, and to keep going in good heart and with integrity.
- He asks: '*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*' (Acts 16.30)
- Saved from what?
- Saved from being brought down by the challenges, the misfortunes, and the unhappinesses of life lived on one's own terms, according to one's own abilities.
- He wants to be rescued from a self-centred life to one that is differently-centred.
- So they answered, '*Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.*' (Acts 16.31)
- That is, instead of centring your life on yourself, centre it on Jesus Christ: live your life in alignment with Jesus.

They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God. (Acts 16.32–34)

Jesus' prayer

- I'm going to conclude by referring back to Jesus' prayer in the Gospel reading.
- If we look at that, we can see how the story of Paul and Silas witnessing to God's love even while in jail, and then further sharing that with the jailer and his family, prove to be an instance of God answering Jesus' prayer.

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- Jesus prayed:

'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.' (John 17.20–23)

- So may you, like Paul and his companions, have that deep assurance that God loves you, and that Jesus, the Lamb of God, is sovereign in your life.
- May you find the courage to share with others the difference that your faith in Jesus - and his faith in you - makes in your life.
- And may you be inspired to offer up prayer and worship even when you are going through an ordeal, knowing that the love of God ultimately prevails.