

We did a series last autumn around Revelation and I like to leave it for a while because you can have too much Revelation; so I've left it for a year but we've come back to it now and this morning we're going to be going into, as Jane said at the beginning of the service, into the throne room of God. We're going to get this picture of what that throne room looks like – we must remember that Revelation is all about symbolism, so we don't take things literally but we want to understand what is the symbolism of all that we read in Revelation. And we going to look at the scripture together now, chapter 4 verses 1 to 11:

[Reading Genesis 1:1-2:4] There we go.

So there's the symbolism that we have in this chapter of Revelation. As I've said before Revelation is full of symbolism, and symbols are a strange thing – I think I've spoken about this before: the symbol is not the thing itself, a symbol represents something else. When the oil indicator comes up on my car, it's not an actual oil can it's a symbol of an oil can telling me “Steve, you've got to be something about this; if you keep driving with your car like this the engine's going to seize up because it needs oil,” but it's oil can symbol – it's not the thing itself. And so symbolism speaks to us in all sorts of ways and we still have many symbols in our world today. Not just practical ones like oil can that comes up on my car, but other symbols that can speak to us powerfully; and they've done so down through the years, down to the centuries.

This here is a picture of an ancient East Scotland encampment that was found a few years ago and it's called Forteviot and it's quite close to the city of Perth in Scotland, but it was archaeologists who found the remains of an 8th and 9th century Kingdom, and they think the first recognised king of this part of Scotland was based this place now called Forteviot. And there were various symbols of power that they used back in those days, and we would regard as pagan symbols that they used to help in their worship, to focus on their understanding of who God was. So symbols have been powerful to us down through the centuries.

Here's a few symbols from the other parts of the world: the Sphinx, which of course has the body of a cat and the face of a human being. And the Sphinx was created as a statement of the power of the gods that the Egyptians worshipped, and it was a statement of the power and majesty of the standing of one of their gods.

Here's another symbol, a one that can cause all sorts of conflicting feelings for people – this is a Crusader knight, And the Crusaders, of course, particularly went out to the Middle East to try and retake Jerusalem because Jerusalem at that stage had been overrun by Muslims, and so there was this mighty call within Christendom, within the Christian Kingdom, to retake Jerusalem. An interesting idea to retake Jerusalem, restore the power and the majesty of God by retaking of the city of Jerusalem. The question might come to mind: “Well, are we behaving in Christian ways, in the way that we seek to re-establish God's kingdom on Earth?” Still today when people celebrate St George's day, I've seen people dressed in not quite suits of armour, but certainly with a shield and a make believe costume similar to that. It throws up all sorts of complex ideas about the way that British culture, or English culture, has impose itself down through the years.

Similar to that: Britannia. Britannia rules the waves? Britain never never will be slaves? It's interesting imagery and symbolism that we receive through these ideas. And I'm not saying symbolism's wrong, all I'm saying is we need to unpack it and understand what is it saying about

who we are as people. What does it say? What is it trying to tell us our value should be? We need to think that through.

So there's some symbols of power. And then we have all sorts of symbolism in the throne room that we have in this passage, and to represent it is incredibly difficult in some sort of pictorial form – this was what I found was the closest to some sort of sense of what the throne room was portrayed in Revelation, in these verses. Interestingly John, of course, was a Jewish man; he was brought up within the Jewish faith and would still have regarded himself as a Jewish man. And so with typical Jewish reverence for God's holiness he would not refer to what God look like himself. You know Jewish people won't say the name of God; they believe the name is too special and has to be given a complete reference by not saying the word. And so John here will not describe what the person sat on the throne looked like, other than to say, use similes, so he looks like Jasper and carnelian (two semi precious stones that we would recognise today). And so he doesn't describe the person on the throne other than to say this person was of such majesty that I wouldn't even try to describe what they look like.

And there are various symbols that we see coming through this passage, and I just want to look at some of those symbols that we get in John's vision here. So he refers to lightning – the lightning that is striking around in this throne room. Of course, lightning would be a reminder of Mount Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments to the first readers of Revelation – they'd have been reminded that there was thunder and lightning as the Ten Commandments were given. And there's also reference to a rainbow; of course that rainbow would have remind everyone of Noah and of the Covenant that was given by God to all people that never again would they be destroyed by a flood. And so you have that picture as well. We have the picture of the people dressed in white and of course still today white is that picture of purity. It's that picture of purity and in particular the spiritual purity that's been referred to as that's being used – that symbol. There is the throne itself a picture of majesty and sovereignty of a throne.

And then we have this interesting picture of the sea of glass. Now I think the interesting bit is when sea is like glass it's when there's no wind. And so here I could probably turn that picture (that I just brought up there) turn it upside down and it would look exactly the same because the water is so like glass, and that's what's being referred to here: it takes us back to the very first verses of Genesis where the Bible says: “the spirit of the Lord hovered over the waters.” And in the Old Testament water was often a reference to chaos. So what happened was the Holy Spirit came and brought form and stillness to the chaos; and so this sea-like glass is a sense that God in his throne room has brought calmness of the other waters.

I want to just pick up on the fact that there was Interchange between Christian symbolism and the symbolism of other faiths back in these days when John was writing. And so here we've got a coin and on the one that's on the right in the far corner it's actually a picture of a Sphinx with wings, and the idea was the Romans believed that they worshipped mythical creatures and they also worshipped the forces of nature. (And the other one actually is a picture of the face of one of the Caesars.) But John is turning this on its head and saying “instead of like the Romans worshipping mythical beasts and worshipping nature, instead recognise that all things worship God.” All things worship God – things we recognised, things that we don't know about – all things were made by God and are made to worship him.

So the power of symbols is something I want to pick up from this passage as well. So for the Jews, of course at this stage when John was writing this Revelation, the Jewish nation was occupied by the Roman army. This is a standard bearer for the Roman army, and he seems to have the head of

a bear on his head and that was a way of looking scary to your enemies; but I find the interesting thing is the Standard which was called a Signum. The Standard: can you see on the top of the Signum, the Standard, there is a hand – there is a hand! And hands today are still used: if you're swearing an oath (probably with your right hand actually) you would hold your hand up and swear an oath. Or when you salute you use a hand to salute with. And so the idea here: it's a reminder that the Roman army have sworn allegiance to Rome and that they have come to this country that they have occupied and you'd better behave yourself, because this Roman army has sworn allegiance to a power greater than you. That's the symbolism that Rome was trying to give to this dominated country of Israel.

In fact Pontius Pilate, he once tried try to have these standards placed all over, on every street corner, in the city of Jerusalem. Now of course the Jews wont put up with and an accept any images of anything to worship, and so Pontius Pilate had really misunderstood the fact that they were going to just accept this. And so he started to erect these Signum, these Standards, across the whole of Jerusalem to remind the Jewish people in the city who their allegiance should be sworn to. Now a large number of Jewish people were outraged by this proposal of these poles telling them to swear allegiance to the Roman Empire. And so they went to Pilate's residence. Now Pilate had a beautiful residence right on the Mediterranean Sea and these hundreds, if not thousands, of Jewish people went out to this Residence and they pleaded with him to respect their law forbidding images for worship being placed in the Holy City. Pilate refused and dismissed them, “No, go away. I'm not interested.” And he continued with the erection of these Standards. So the protesters, the people, gathered and stayed outside his house for 5 days protesting, making themselves a pain outside the front of his house. Finally Pilate asked to meet with the protesters and he said “Let's meet in a local stadium to resolve this issue.” However, Pilate had soldiers hidden in the stadium and so when all of these Jewish protesters gathered in the stadium, then the just came out and surrounded them. Pilate said to them “I'm going to have you all killed unless you agree to worship and accept Caesar's image in the city.” The history records show that the whole group of them threw themselves on the ground not to worship, but they display their necks and said “Kill us. Cut off our heads because we will never ever worship the Roman Standards that you have placed in our city.” They will rather die than break Jewish law. Pilate was a politician, and good politicians know when they're going to win something and when they're not going to win it; and so Pilate ordered that the Roman Standard containing Caesar's image be removed from Jerusalem immediately because he knew it wasn't worth the damage he would do and the way that the reaction would be from the Jewish people. So that's the very same Pilate, of course, that wash his hands of Jesus.

So the power of symbols. The Jewish people knew the power of symbols – they knew that this wasn't just a hand on top of a Standard, it was saying “You now no longer belong to yourselves, you belong to the Roman Empire,” and they rejected that and would not accept it.

What about for us? What are the power of symbols for us? This is actually a guy called Theo Walcott; this is from a few years ago. All I'm trying to say here is the power of symbols. FIFA said (it was about 10 years ago now) they didn't want the poppy (you can see it in the middle of Theo Walcott's shirt there) on the shirt because they said they wouldn't accept any political symbols on football shirts. And the English football authority said it's not a political symbol, it's a symbol of recognising those who have given their lives in wars, in particular the two world wars. (In the end I think what happened was they were allowed to wear a black armband with a poppy on it, so technically it wasn't on the shirt it was on top of the shirt).

So symbols are still powerful and I think we have to recognise that there are symbols sometimes of things that we are encouraged to worship – I don't know about you but you know there are messages and there are things that come across to us in the media, in daily life, that we are being invited to put, to make central, in our lives. We've been told that these things are so important that we should make them central, and we as Christians, just like those Jewish protesters, want to say: “No, my heart and my soul and my spirit belongs to God in Christ!” Rejecting the symbols that are calling us to worship other things.

Roman worship, of course, was imposed: the Romans imposed their worship, they didn't give choice to the people across their empire. Here are two of the most extreme examples of how the Caesars try to impose their will. This young man Caligula. Actually his name wasn't Caligula; Caligula was a nickname because when he was young (he was from the sort of the family that all the first Caesars came from) his family was very rich and powerful, and his father was a very senior general, and like kids do, like boys particularly have done down through the years, the ages, he liked to dress up like his dad, and so he had a little costume which had little Roman boots as part of it, and the word Caligula means “little boots” - because he wore these little boots, these little soldier's boots, just like his dad. But Caligula was not a nice character. He came to believe that he should be worshipped and addressed as a god. He ordered famous and beautiful statues across Rome to be decapitated and for his head to be replaced on them instead. (Talk about hubris, you know, and then sort of like arrogance.) He commanded that one such statue be erected in the Holy of Holies in the Jewish temple.

Once again a flashpoint for the relationship between Rome and the Jewish faith. This time tens of thousands of Jews converged on Galilee – they were protesting in a non-violent way again – they were protesting because the governor at that stage was visiting Galilee, and so they went out to where he was staying to protest. Against they prostrated themselves and said they would prefer to be killed rather than allow this statue to be erected in the Holy of Holies of the temple. The governor, it wasn't Pontius Pilate it was another one by this stage, delayed installation of the statue. And he in fact suggested back to Rome very sensitively, “Perhaps Rome would like to reconsider this decision whether it's worth imposing, putting in the statue in the Holy of Holies.” Caligula replied by saying “Just for asking that question I want you to do the honourable thing (this is to the governor) and kill yourself now!” However, Caligula was assassinated before the governor could obey the order to kill himself (which he was probably quite grateful for) and so he survived. But the context of this is: all of these sorts of things, those two examples I've given, these threats to Jewish worship, the desire to impose Roman symbols – to say you now belong to Rome – they fed in to the general sense of resentment towards Roman rule that eventually led to the Jewish War. And sadly sometimes these symbols that are imposed, in the end they lead to conflict – and that's what happened in 66 to 70 AD: the Jewish war to try and get rid of Rome out of Israel. That was Caligula.

There's also Nero. Nero we know again – he was blamed for burning part of Rome to destroy it; interestingly after it had been destroyed he then built for himself a great big palace on that site, and it's thought that actually he destroyed that bit of Rome because it was the best way to get everybody out so he could build afresh on that land. And he used the Christians as a scapegoat for how it happened: “It's the Christians, they burned Rome! Let's persecute them.” He also erected a huge statue of himself for the people to worship. This statue was 13m high – almost 100 feet in height – saying to the people “Worship me, I am the one who brings you safety through the power of Rome!” Roman worship was imposed, particularly through the imposition of power by the Caesars.

So the Jewish responses (we looked a little bit that for a moment or two) were different: you had the zealots – and still today we use the word Zealot for somebody who is prepared to fight, to defend their position, we often will call them a Zealot: “Oh he’s a real Zealot, he won’t let go off whatever it is they believe.” The zealots were Freedom Fighters of their day. And the zealots they believed armed insurrection was the way to free the Jewish people from Roman rule. So they would do what they could – it was like a guerrilla warfare: they would set light to things and destroy things to try and make it just not worth the Romans being there. In the end their story ended on this mountain top – it was not really a mountain, but a high place – called Masada. And Masada was a high fortress and when they’d been chased out of Rome they took themselves up to this high fortress, and the Roman army besieged them for over a year. And in the end 936 zealots, including women and children, killed themselves on Masada – in the Masada fortress – rather than surrender to the Romans. So that was one response – the zealots was one response: to stand and fight.

Another response was from some people called the Essenes, and it’s thought that actually John the Baptist may have grown up with the Essenes. The Essenes took themselves off out into the deserts because Jerusalem and the Priestly system that the Jews had, they regarded as completely corrupt. So the way to purify themselves was to take themselves into the deserts and to build themselves an encampment way out in the desert, away from everybody else, and be pure that way, by not sulling themselves with the realities of politics in Jerusalem and the rest of Israel. And so they took themselves off out there, and they were apocalyptics so they believe the end was very very near. And in general they didn’t marry, they had a common person (so nobody owned anything themselves – all they had they pooled and they all lived off that centrally – they despised wealth, they wore white robes (once again goes back to our passage today – they wore white robes as signs of spiritual purity) and they took regular ritual baths to remind themselves of God purification of them, and they felt the High Priests in Jerusalem had sold out.

So you got fight, like the Zealots, or you’ve got flight, like the Essenes. And the Essenes believed that there was going to be a time when God would come and restore them, and God would miraculously deal with all of the evil and the negative, but in a way that would require their efforts. The interesting thing is that in the middle there you got Christians. One of the Christian disciples was called “Simon the Zealot” so it seems as though even at the heart of Jesus’ group of disciples there was a strain about political resistance. Even in the heart of the disciples there were people that believed, or had believed (perhaps they moved away from it through the ministry of Jesus but previously had believed) that the way to change things was through armed Insurrection.

So just to finish this reflection upon symbolism and the power that it has, the outcome was that the Roman army retook Jerusalem and they routed and razed to the ground Jerusalem. They killed, or carried into servitude, pretty much the whole of the city. Of course we don’t have pictures of it, so this is a much later representation of the sacking of Jerusalem, what it looked like the destruction of Jerusalem. They destroyed the whole city.

This is a relief so it’s a picture chiselled into stone, and it was in a Roman temple (and actually if you see in the middle there, there’s a Menorah) and this was the carrying off of all of the booty from Jerusalem, so the Menorah would have been made of gold and here’s the Roman army carrying off all of the booty, all that they’ve gained, from destroying Jerusalem, carrying it back to Rome; and they would parade it through the streets and they would drag along with them the slaves that they had made from Jerusalem (on this occasion) to show: “look how great we are – these people stood against us now look at them!” Once again a symbol of their power.

And just this coin here: there's a woman sitting on one side, sitting down, and the writing around the side says "Captive Judea". And this is a picture of a woman sitting mourning the loss of her temple, her city and her people. This coin was minted by the Roman Empire for 25 years after the destruction of Jerusalem to remind everybody "Don't forget: you step out of line - remember what happened to Jerusalem!" reminding everyone what happens when you rebel against the Roman army.

So I want to finish with this phrase: "Where your treasure is..." you'll know the end of it - "Where your treasure is...there your heart will be also." And those two examples of the Jewish people, they said "Kill us! We'd rather die than compromise our faith." I want to finish asking the question "Where is our treasure?" Where do we place our treasure because where that treasure is our heart will be placed as well. So where the treasure is there will your heart be also. Descartes once said "I think therefore I am" and somebody's rewritten that as a consumer statement: "I shop therefore I am now." Now it's tongue-in-cheek, but there's an element, isn't there, of we feel so drawn to, you know, there's a sale on "Oh well, I could get some bargains there, and I could..." and there's a sense of being pulled in sometimes into "having more stuff helps us to feel as though we are of more significance."

Individualism. We are more individualistic in our society, in our world, today perhaps than any generation in the past. We want to plough our own furrow and in a sense that's not necessarily wrong, but when it's a ploughing of that furrow that ignores and even works against the fact that we are all sharing this country, and this community, and this world, together it suggests that our treasure is placed in how we can look after ourselves and our own, rather than look after this one planet that we all live on.

Do you remember about 10 years ago there was a big protest - an anti-capitalist protest - and the protesters they were looking for somewhere to be in London, and they went and got into the grounds of St. Paul's Cathedral, and they had their signs up saying "What would Jesus do?" and it made me think at the time of "I wonder where would Jesus be? Would he be in the majesty of that cathedral, in the silence and the majesty of that place, or would he be outside in the tent city that surrounded St Paul's at the time?" I think in a sense he would have been in both places, but God does stand with those who are suffering and are in a sense of feeling as though this world is not just meant to be for those with power and privilege, it's meant to be a world for all of us.

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Instead of living just for ourselves Jesus gives us that ultimate picture, that ultimate symbol, of living to serve others, to sacrifice our desires for other people, for living not for ourselves. His sacrificial way of living should be a challenge to each one of us each day. But we live not for ourselves but for how we can serve and support our fellows, our neighbours - those around us, particularly those in trouble, and in difficulty.

Let's pray for a moment.

Lord God we pray that's having sought to come into your throne room through our worship, having sought to understand the symbolism that your word gives us, and having reflected on the fact that we can be drawn in to finding ourselves longing for and worshipping without realising what we are doing, that Lord God you call us to live not for what we can get but to live for how we can serve and be people giving of ourselves for others. Lord Jesus I pray you will help us as we reflect on how we live, how our values and ways of living can reflect your character. In your name we pray these things Lord Jesus, amen.