

**The Third Sunday after Easter (Easter 4)**  
*Balliol College, Oxford, 2024*

*Psalm 81:8-16*

*Exodus 16:4-15*

*Revelation 2:12-17*

May the words of my lips, and the meditation of all of our hearts, be now and always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

I can't speak for anyone else, but I'm willing to hazard a guess that when one is invited to be a guest preacher anywhere, one's heart sinks a little when details of the readings arrive, and an extract from the Revelation to St John is set. Revelation is such a distinctive text within the New Testament, having much more in common with the apocalyptic literature of the Hebrew Scriptures than most of the rest of the New Testament, and even short sections, such as that which we have heard this evening, contain masses of stuff to unpack.

Esther has instructed me to preach for no more than 10 minutes, so the task becomes even harder. I'd like to say something about God's provision, something about Satan's throne, and something about Christ. That is probably quite enough for one evening.

The front end of the Revelation to St John is fascinating because it comprises seven letters, or messages, to seven angels of seven churches of Asia Minor, all clustered around the Aegean Sea, in what is modern-day Turkey. And we have joined part way through that set of letters. If you keep reading from the lectionary next week you will hear two more letters, to two more churches. Today's message is to the church, or rather to the *angel* of the church - it's not clear whether that is a spiritual being or a human, but certainly someone with oversight of this

little Christian community - in Pergamum, which is the northernmost of these seven urban areas.

And actually what's interesting about the passage we heard today, and the other six, is that there is a consistent message about human context and God's provision. The messages to the angels vary in their content - some are really quite positive, one in particular is pretty condemnatory, and most of them, like the one to Pergamum which we have heard tonight, is a mixed bag. The church, we are told, is holding fast to God's name which is commendable, and even when a significant figure, Antipas, is martyred, their faith has held. But nonetheless they are living 'where Satan's throne is', meaning that they are subject to all of the temptations, obsessions and distractions that come along with trying to be people of faith in a fallen world. And those temptations, obsessions and distractions are contextual. For the church in Pergamum they include two potential heresies - those of the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans. And in a longer sermon I would unpack what those are.

Every Christian community has a context, and the temptations, obsessions and distractions are contextual too. My job tonight is a hit-and-run - get in, preach, and get out -, but the rest of you belong here, you form the local Christian community, and it will be important for you to identify the distinctive temptations, obsessions and distractions to the people of God at Balliol. They *will* be here.

Just as sure, and far more enduring however, is the promise of God's provision. The golden thread that runs through all three readings tonight is that of manna - Bread from heaven. [*ad lib on the hymn if appropriate*]. It is provided for the children of Israel in the wilderness, the psalmist reminded us of God's promise, 'Israel would I feed with the finest wheat', and the angel at Pergamum is assured that 'to everyone who conquers

[God] will give some hidden manna.’ The message tonight is one of provision. God intends to feed us.

The *trap* that is set for us is to murmur against that provision, or the promise of that provision. And that is what Satan’s throne is about. Revelation has this great vision of course of Satan being down on earth, and sort of flailing about creating as much destruction as possible before the end of time comes. And one of the great traps that is set is the trap of murmuring, or complaining. The Hebrew word for complaining is used six times in the brief passage we heard this evening. And of course, we know that it’s not long after the miraculous bread from heaven has been gifted before the people begin to complain that the manna is tedious and distasteful.

St Benedict, Father of western monasticism and huge influence on the development of the Western church more generally, addresses complaining, or murmuring, in no fewer than nine chapters in his relatively brief Rule. He sees this is the root cause of Christian communities going bad. To murmur, to grumble, to complain, is to doubt God’s provision, and to do it under the radar, to plant little timebombs here and there. ‘Have you heard what X said about Y last week?’ And time and again we have learned how destructive that can be to any community, and particularly a Christian community, whether that is a parish community, a college, or a cathedral. Murmuring separates member from member, whereas the great prayer of Christ is that we may all be one. So a useful bit of personal inventory, fairly regularly, is probably to test ourselves for that type of murmuring.

Something about God’s provision. Something about Satan’s throne. And then finally something about Christ. Towards the end of the reading from Revelation is the promise of the ‘hidden manna’, and the white stone upon which is written a new name.

Both of these, I think, point us towards Christ. The traditional introit text for Christmas Eve is taken from our reading from Exodus: ‘in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord’. Just as the manna descends from heaven like dew in the morning, so comes Christ at Christmas. Gifted as bread from heaven, our Lord comes to nourish and sustain us. But unlike the manna, which lasts just one or two days, Christ the bread from heaven endures. And that is because he knows us by name, and we are his - you will hear those words addressed to the candidates for baptism and confirmation in a month’s time. It’s not entirely clear what the white stone means in today’s reading, various scholars say various things, but the really important thing about it is that it bears a new name which is personal to the recipient. So the bread that comes down from heaven and endures, Christ, is certainly both *personal* and *particular*. Just like all of God’s provision through the centuries, this most personal blessing is contextual also. It operates at the level of your heart. At the level of your soul. If you are minded to receive it: to take that white stone in your hand, to marvel at the inner geography of your life glistening with manna from heaven, new every morning.

We don’t need to open our eyes very much, or pay huge attention to the news, to recognise that we still live out our days where Satan’s throne is. Ukraine, Gaza, Sydney, boats in the channel, wrongly convicted subpostmasters, and on the list goes. How we use our agency really matters. As Augustine and others have reminded us throughout the tradition, we have the choice of whether we allow our soul to curve in on itself and murmur, or turn outwards to the light, see the manna on the fields and streets around us, confound Satan’s throne, claim the new name offered on the white stone, and say to the darkness, ‘I beg to differ.’

Amen.