



Visions of the End? Revelation and Climate Change

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Rev 8: 1 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

In chapter four of Revelation the author tells us that the song of praise before God 'never ceases' (4:8), but now there is silence. 'Heaven seems to hold its breath because of what is about to happen on earth'. Perhaps the author is thinking of the passage in 2 Esdras where the world returns to its "original silence" as "at the beginning of creation" when nobody will be left alive (7:30 cf.6:39). It is an intensely dramatic image which has caught people's imaginations all the way from the first century to Ingmar Bergman.

It could speak about the fear we feel about the possible effects of climate change as represented by James Lovelock in *The Revenge of Gaia*, or Mark Lynas in *Six Degrees*.

But the silence does not last. Seven trumpets are given to seven angels. These may be the seven archangels found in Jewish tradition and in this tradition trumpets are used to warn or to call. "All you inhabitants of the world, when a trumpet is blown, hear!" says Isaiah (Is.18:3) It is the task of prophets as watchmen to call the people to "give heed to the sound of the trumpet", to hear the warning says Jeremiah (Jer 6:17). The word of the LORD came to me, says Ezekiel:

33 [2] "Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman;

[3] and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people;

[4] then if any one who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head.

The prophet is a watchman. So here the angels, and the writer recording what they say, fulfil the role of prophets. They give a warning to the people of God.

How should one address climate change theologically? One could review the theological options – stewardship, the integrity of creation as we find it in Thomas Aquinas, or the intrinsic holiness of creation to which Orthodox theology appeals. We could spend an evening on environmental ethics. We could look at the way in which Trinitarian doctrine bears on it. I choose instead to address the issue through the Book of Revelation. This may well seem a very dubious choice: am I not aligning myself with those fundamentalists who have Rapture stickers on their bumpers? Do I think that the book of Revelation foretold

climate change? In the first case, I hope not, and in the second case, of course not. Let me say right at the outset that I take it for granted that the author of Revelation had no inkling of climate change and the original intention of his imagery related to the Roman Empire. In the same way the first Isaiah warned against invasion from the North, and the second Isaiah spoke of the return from exile. Every Scripture text emerges from a particular context. But we read all these texts in the wider context of the divine intention as revealed in Christ: law, wisdom, prophecy, poetry all speak of the engagement of God with humankind and invite us to reflect on that engagement today. Put slightly differently I begin from the presupposition that in Scripture we have words which, as Karl Barth put it in regard to Romans, 'urgently and finally address the very marrow of human civilisation', and not a heap of archaeological rubble only of interest to ancient historians.ⁱⁱ This applies also, in my view, to the Book of Revelation. To be church is to be defined as the community which lives from this collection of writings. What the doctrine of inspiration very feebly and unimaginatively tries to express is the experience, and therefore the assumption, that the community constantly has things of value to learn from these its founding documents. It learns things despite the fact that the situations in which the text is read constantly change. It was true in the middle ages as it is true today that in regard to no ethical issue – whether in sexuality, politics or economics - do we find in Scripture specific prescriptions which the task is simply to follow. What we learn, rather, is the direction we have to look for answers. In Rowland and Roberts' words scripture gives us 'something like orientations, models, types, directives, principles, inspirations', the things needed to give us a hermeneutic competence to make decisions about our present.ⁱⁱⁱ This is true also of what some people consider that very odd book, the Revelation of John

In thinking about climate change as a Christian I turn to Revelation for three reasons. First of all it is what we call 'apocalyptic' literature. Apocalypse does not mean catastrophe and disaster, as we tend to use the word. It means disclosing, exposing, making manifest, holding up this world to the judgement of God. It has nothing to do with 'the end of the world' or its 'extermination'. As Moltmann puts it: 'What Jewish and Christian apocalyptic intends is not to evoke horror in the face of the end, but to encourage endurance in resistance to the powers of this world'.^{iv} That is the first key reason for going to Revelation.

The biblical apocalypses emerged from dangerous situations where symbolic imagery was used to interpret present events and they are voices of desperation and hope. This is why we listen to them and why they have something to say to us. It might be that Revelation is particularly apposite for our times. When the great Dutch scholar, Miskotte, was asked to give some bible studies in the ruins of Amsterdam in 1945 he chose Nehemiah – because it is about re-building the city. In the same way Revelation may speak to us because, it seems to me, we share with its original hearers a sense that things are beyond our control and there is not much we can do. We share with the original readers or hearers a sense of helplessness in the face of Babylon the Great, which in our day is the whole Market system, an idolatrous economy.

Second, apocalyptic literature is basically underground literature, communicating in a symbolic language. Symbols run deeper than words and the symbols from this particular book have done much to shape the Western imagination. Unfortunately our own rational mindset makes little of them. A fellow member of the Iona community told me that one of the funniest evensongs he had attended was when the minister read a portion of Revelation and concluded, 'Thank God, we only have three more days of this rubbish!' Such

failure to understand the symbols is only too common, so it is worth engaging with them to see if they are quite as opaque as people think.

Third, the book of Revelation is a patchwork of quotations from the Hebrew bible, and perhaps includes, as we shall see, echoes of what we now know as Synoptic material. The author is scripturally literate. To be Christian, I have already said, is to have our identity given us by the narratives, poems and reflections we call 'Scripture'. We can learn from this author something of what it means to dwell within a tradition. Of course we are never again going to become like the 17th c Puritans, whose discourse was saturated with Scripture, but if we forget it, if it no longer shapes our imaginations, then we forget who we are and we cease to be church. The book of Revelation, therefore, encourages us in scriptural literacy. There are many good commentaries on Revelation, but I am following the commentary by Bas Wielenga, who I learned from and taught alongside in India and who highlights the connections between the text and our contemporary situation, including climate change.

I have begun with Revelation chp 8 and what I am going to do is to look at just two short sections of text, first, chapter 8 and a few verses of chapter 9, and then turn briefly to part of chp 3 and 4 where the writer talks about the church. I will try first to see how the text might bear on climate change, and then see what it has to say to us as Christians in the face of it.

So now back to our text

8: 6 – 12

Four angels, one after the other, blow their trumpets and destruction falls on the earth (vs 7), the sea (vs 8), the rivers (vs 10) and heaven / sky (vs 12). One third of all life is affected, but not all life is destroyed. Some scholars assume that the text reflects cosmic occurrences in John's time, such as an eclipse in AD 68 and volcanic eruptions.

The prophet is a watchman. He blows the trumpet to warn us of impending danger. 'This text', says Wielenga, 'may encourage us to listen to the warning voices of ecological researchers and to the news about rising sea-levels, pollution of earth and sea and rivers and to respond to them by repenting and calling to repentance, by changing our lifestyles'.
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There is no lack of warning: the trumpets have been sounding for quite some time. We know that ice core records indicate that CO2 levels have been the same for 1000s of yrs, but are now 30% above pre industrial levels. They have risen almost a degree in the past 100 years. The ice sheet covering the Arctic Ocean has lost 40% of its volume over the last 30 years and could be completely gone in decades. In Antarctica three great ice sheets have gone completely. Nobody has modelled what the effect of this ice loss would be. Andrew Simms, Director of the Climate Change programme at the New Economic Foundation argues that in 100 months from 1 August 2008, atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases will begin to exceed a point whereby it is no longer likely we will be able to avert potentially irreversible and catastrophic climate change. He and his fellow researcher believe this calculation to be conservative. Jeff Ridley of the Met Office believes that the Copenhagen conference is the last chance we have of avoiding warming rising to

2°. That may sound very little but he is sceptical of our avoiding a rise to 3° and believes that were we to reach 4° no eco system could adapt.

Christian Aid tells us that many of the disasters they are responding to have been caused by extreme weather. The poorest countries suffer because of pollution by richest. Two thirds of South Asia's disasters are climate-related. As global warming increases the frequency, severity and unpredictability of extreme weather events, and causes sea levels to rise, South Asians will bear the brunt. Bangladesh, for example, is predicted to lose a tenth of its rice crop and one third of its wheat output over the next 50 years.

What is the cause of all these problems? Of course, rising populations is part of the equation but that in turn is bound up with economic development since the 18th century. Much of this development is good. For millennia people have gone hungry, for millennia they have suffered and died without understanding either cause or cure. The chance to change that had to be grasped. But two factors distorted the development. First, scientific and technological progress gave people the illusion of total control. People thought the so called natural world could be reduced to questions of input-output, know how, cost benefits, and functionality. Commenting on the imperative for farms to get bigger and on the boast that a tiny percentage of the population could now feed the rest, Wendell Berry condemns the technology of infinity, which makes us all its slaves. The machine, he comments, has become an anti god, assuming the shape of the tempter – 'All these things will I give you if you will fall down and worship me'. A limitless technology, he comments, is dependent on a limitless morality, which is to say upon no morality at all. By contrast, the knowledge of our limits is 'the most comely and graceful knowledge that we have, the most healing and the most whole'.vi In fact, as more and more scientists have been insisting over the past forty years, many natural processes, and in particular the way in which they interrelate, are very poorly understood. The way feedbacks are hastening climate change comes as a surprise because people thought they had the natural world taped. Rather late they find that they do not at all. At the same time all forms of technological progress since 1760 or so have been harnessed to a profit-oriented economic rationality, or irrationality, which has had the reproduction and accumulation of Capital as its primary goal and this remains true to this day. What this means is that the ecological crisis is a crisis of a whole world view and a whole world system, which we refer to these days as 'globalization'. The triumphs of Western technology and of Market economics have been exported to the whole inhabited earth but may cost the whole inhabited earth.

So totally are we enmeshed in this pseudo rationality that we have difficulty accepting the facts. We take refuge in denial. Alistair MacIntosh reminds us that 88% of British people think climate change is happening but only 41% think human beings cause it. 7 out of 10 think the government should take a lead but only 21% support increasing the cost of flying and only 14% support increasing the cost of petrol. Energy consumption is actually rising. Distances travelled by private car increased by 17% between 1996 and 2004; and the number of passenger kilometres by plane rose from 125 billion to 260 billion worldwide between 1990 and 2000.vii The political will to change things isn't there because the electorate aren't worried enough. We are doubling airport capacity and adding 2500 miles more roads. Our economic system, says McIntosh, is infantile. We have what he calls 'consensus trance reality', drifting around in a quasi hypnotic state whilst danger accumulates silently ahead of us.viii

It is in this situation that the warning is sounded. Revelation is not astrology: it is not foretelling particular events, the catastrophes which might attend climate change. What it does do, however, is prompt us to thought. The message to the churches, 'Wake up!' is addressed to us. The call to repentance is always a call to action. It is a call to reshape our economy, our ways of living, our way of farming. And Revelation puts this call in the framework of an appeal to the exodus. What this does is remind us that these visions of calamities must be read within the framework of God's redemptive will. They are not, as they have often been read, about divine vengeance or destruction.

At this point we have to go back to a verse I skipped earlier, 8.3. "Another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer. And he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints". In chapter 18 incense is one of the commodities sold in Babylon the Great, but here it is given and mingled with the prayers of the saints. Why? 'Prayers' says Wielenga, 'are often so broken-winged, so mingled with bitterness, so loaded with hatred that they need to be purified, to be focused, to be liberated, to be lifted up in order to become part of that all-inclusive prayer "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven".ix This acceptance of our prayers as they are and their transformation in accordance with God's purpose is a gift from heaven and not something we can buy'.

We do not know how to pray as we ought, says St Paul. This is the most fundamental truth in the whole Christian teaching of prayer. All Prayer schools begin and end here. Paul says the Spirit prays through us. Here our author says the same thing, but in symbolic language, in terms of the angels giving incense to our prayers. How on earth do we pray in face of the perils of climate change? We don't know – but God knows, and gives incense to our prayers.

There is an interruption after the fourth trumpet which marks the transition to the last three trumpets. John hears an eagle crying in mid heaven "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth". These three woes which are linked to the three trumpets (see 9:1; 9:13; 11:14) announce the release of demonic forces which are emerging from the bottomless pit and threaten to overwhelm the earth and its inhabitants.

It is tempting to read this in the light of the Kenneth Horne character who called out, 'Doomed! We're all doomed!'. And the 100 months analysis could be read in this way. But in Scripture the image of the eagle is positive. 'Deuteronomy compares God's caring and sustaining concern for his people with an "eagle that flutters over his young, stretching out its wings, catching them, bearing them"(Dt 32:11). And Second Isaiah compares the renewal of strength through hope in the LORD with mounting up "with wings like eagles" (40:31). Woes on the other hand occur as exclamations of fear and as lament over those who are going to die or have died. 'The woes are an expression of compassionate concern from heaven about what is going to happen to the people on earth and at the same time a call to face it, to bear it till it passes and to repent (see 9:20f.).' The woes are addressed to those who are happily and comfortably at home and at ease in Babylon – not only to the climate change deniers, but to all those of us who simply don't sense the urgency in changing our lifestyles. 'The woes say that heaven is deeply concerned that they wake up to it and mend their ways'.x

The fifth angel blows his trumpet and John sees "a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key of the shaft of the bottomless pit". Here it is a fallen star, in 20:1 an

angel coming down from heaven who holds the key of the bottomless pit. The abyss or bottomless pit is a metaphor for the place from whence human wickedness draws its inspiration. It is, as it were, a deep reservoir of evil which reinforces everything which opposes and obstructs the purpose of God. As Walter Wink teaches us, it is a way of speaking of the consolidated negative spirituality which has us in its grip.

The smoke which rises up from the bottomless pit is a counter-image to the "smoke of the incense" which rose with the prayers of the saints before God's throne (8:4). What rises from the abyss is the opposite. It stands for the spirituality of evil which at times spreads on earth and threatens to overwhelm the spirituality of the prayer "thy kingdom come, thy will be done". Remember D.H.Lawrence in Germany in 1923

It is as if life had retreated eastwards. As if the Germanic life were slowly ebbing away from contact with western Europe, ebbing to the deserts of the east...Returning again to the fascination of the destructive east, that produced Attila...at night you feel strange things stirring in the darkness, strange feelings stirring out of this still unconquered Black Forest. You stiffen your backbone and you listen to the night. There is a sense of danger. It is not the people. They don't seem dangerous. Out of the very air comes a sense of danger, a queer, bristling feeling of uncanny danger.

Something has happened. Something has happened which has not yet eventuated. The old spell of the old world has broken, and the old, bristling, savage spirit has set in...Something has happened to the human soul, beyond all help...It is a fate; nobody now can alter it...At the same time, we have brought it about ourselves – by a Ruhr occupation, by an English nullity, and by a German false will. We have done it ourselves. But apparently it was not to be helped.

This, says Wink, is an example of the Domination system. 'This spirit-killing atmosphere penetrates everything, teaching us not only what to believe, but what we can value and even what we can see'.xi

In Scripture this is spoken of in terms of hardening our hearts. As Wielenga points out, there are many examples in history of such hardening of the heart gripping a society and leading to destructive madness. Perhaps our addiction to consumerism, our implicit or explicit denial of climate change, should be understood as one of them. The ecological crisis is, as Jürgen Moltmann said, already twenty four years ago, not simply a technological crisis but a religious crisis of the paradigm in which people in the Western world, and increasingly Asia as well, put their trust and live. It is a moral and spiritual crisis. For this reason it cannot be met either by bland optimism or by faith in technology. It has to be met with a stronger and deeper faith appealing to quite different grounds of hope. Here the author of Revelation speaks to us. He teaches us to 'lift up our heads', and to be open for God's new beginning in the breakdown of the world system constructed in the past two hundred years.

The angels release plagues which cause a disintegration of creation, a return to chaos, but the locusts "were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those of humankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads."(vs 4) The target of the locusts is humans and not non-human creation. The imagery is difficult but the main point seems to be that there is still scope for repentance. The question to us

is whether we understand the ecological crisis as God's warning judgment, as a call to repent, to turn away from the sins of which they are the consequences.

I am now going to turn back from chps 8 and 9 to chapter 3, because I want to ask where the church stands in all of this. I turn especially to the warning to the church in Laodicea.

3.14 And to the angel of the church in La-odice'a write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

[15] " 'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot!

[16] So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.

[17] For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Laodicea was a prosperous city, known for its banks, textiles and medicine. The church here gets the most severe judgement of all the seven churches the author addresses. It will be spewed out because it is lukewarm and neither cold nor hot. What this seems to mean is that their prosperity causes them neither to have the passion to change the world nor to know the bleak misery of despair. They are at ease in Zion. Throughout the letters Christ is spoken of as the Lord of creation, recalling the letters of Colossians and Ephesians. The problem with the Laodiceans is that they lack concern for God's creation. 'They accumulate wealth in their banks, they are skilled in appropriating the resources of creation, but they do not know how needy they are. They lack the solidarity in hope with the creation which is groaning to be set free (Rom 8:18-25). Their lukewarm indifference to their fellow creatures may actually be the sort of spirituality which leads to the destruction of the earth (cf. 11:18). Therefore, says the author, in fact you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. We have to ask whether this does not apply to us, who in our self-centred consumerism are indifferent to what happens to the creation whose resources we exploit. Our eyes need to be opened, we need wisdom, we need to repent and to open the door and to learn what it is to share in the messianic meal'. xii To do that at the present time might be to seriously accept the path of contraction and convergence, to find ways to share the blessings of creation and not, Samson like, to take everything down with us.

John goes on to a vision of God in heaven. As Wielenga argues, many people find the royal imagery out of date and alienating, but what the author wants to convey is the message that there is not only the power of Rome or Washington, not only the power of the giant transnational companies, but a different reality beyond the grasp of those destructive powers. There is a throne in heaven, there is an alternative power at work in history. It is the power of love – as the vision of the Lamb will reveal – a power which aims at redeeming life and sustaining it. Around the throne is the rainbow, the sign of God's covenant with the earth and all life (Gen 9:13) This vision assures us that God's "majesty is equalled by his mercy" (Ecclesiasticus 2:18) or rather that majesty is revealed in God's benevolent reign of care for the earth. The door to heaven is open. As long as heaven is thought to be closed we can be under the illusion that the destructive powers are the only ones that count but John opens our eyes both to the forces of destruction and the throne in heaven with the rainbow which will prevail.xiii

In the vision the twenty four elders cry out, 'You are worthy, Lord God, to receive glory and honour and power: for you created all things, and through your will they are and were created'.(4.11) 'The author reminds us that we are called to give glory and honour and power to God in our relationship to all that God has called into existence. Hundreds of

thousands of species are threatened with extinction today. By your will they existed and were created since the elders. Why does the church not join more eagerly in the worldwide protests against the extinction of species meant to praise without ceasing the holiness of God? How do we learn to cast the crowns of money, power and of science and technology before the throne of God?'xiv

As we know Revelation is a favourite text for preachers predicting the end of the world, but this is a gross misuse of the book. When it speaks of destruction it is thinking of the destruction of destructive powers. 'The powers of militarism, of Babylon and Rome, the beast from the abyss, the power of poisonous propaganda, the idolatry of wealth and might – such are the rebellious forces which stand in the way of God's kingdom. They stand condemned by the witness, death and resurrection of the Messiah and his witnesses. For them there is no future – thank God. Their destruction by God's judgement opens the future for the earth and humankind. The secret of that liberative judgement is the covenant, his promise to redeem and not to destroy. That is what becomes visible at the sound of the last trumpet: "the ark of his covenant" as the "temple in heaven was opened".
xv

Revelation is a call to hope grounded on faith, not optimism. It is a call to repentance and action. Action means in the first instance all the obvious things – recycling, insulating, using cars and aeroplanes less, being responsible about our carbon footprint. Much more it means acting to bring change about – trying to bring about that huge shift in public consciousness which is necessary to do that. The transition town movement is one such movement in which we can involve ourselves. It is grass roots, bottom up, and it has the potential to transform communities and our energy patterns. It could represent the kind of moral tipping point, in the right not the wrong direction, which we need. Christians have not invented or led this movement but they should engage in it, bringing to it hope in the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead as the ground of action in the face of imminent danger. With reference to this hope I want to end with some words from Moltmann's God in Creation. And I will remind you first of the wonderful story about Luther and the apple tree. Luther was asked what he would do if he knew the world was going to end the next day. His answer was, 'Plant an apple tree'. This expresses his faith in God's purposes for the creation. Moltmann says this:

'In the present situation of our world facile consolation is as fatal as melancholy hopelessness. No one can assure us that the worst will not happen. According to all the laws of experience: it will. We can only trust that even the end of the world hides a new beginning if we trust the God who calls into being the things that are not, and out of death creates new life...In view of the deadly dangers threatening the world, Christian remembrance makes ever present the death of Christ in its apocalyptic dimensions, in order to draw forth from his resurrection from the dead hope for 'the life of the world to come', and from his rebirth to eternal life hope for the rebirth of the cosmos...Life out of this hope then means already acting here and today in accordance with that world of justice and righteousness and peace, contrary to appearances, and contrary to all historical chances of success. It obliges us to solemnly abjure the spirit, logic and practice of the nuclear system of deterrence and all other systems of mass annihilation. It means an unconditional Yes to Life in the face of the inescapable death of all the living. That is the deeper meaning of the legendary Luther saying about 'the apple tree' which he would plant today even if he knew that the world was going to end tomorrow'xvi.

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- ⁱ I am following the commentary of Bas Wielenga, *Revelation to John: Tuning into Songs of Moses and the lamb*, New Delhi: ISPCK 2009 p.61
- ⁱⁱ K.Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1933 p.9
- ⁱⁱⁱ C.Rowland and Jonathan Roberts *The Bible for Sinners: Interpretation for the Present Time* London: SPCK 2008 p.58
- ^{iv} J. Moltmann *The Coming of God* London SCM 1996 p. 218
- ^v Wielenga, op.cit p. 63
- ^{vi} W.Berry *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* San Francisco: Sierra 1996 p.78,94
- ^{vii} A.McIntosh *Hell and High Water* Edinburgh: Birlin p.87
- ^{viii} McIntosh op.cit p. 99
- ^{ix} Wielenga, op.cit p. 62
- ^x Wielenga op.cit p. 65
- ^{xi} W.Wink *Engaging the Powers*, Minneapolis: Fortress 1992 p.53 where the Lawrence passage is cited.
- ^{xii} Wielenga op.cit p. 32
- ^{xiii} Wielenga, op.cit p. 34/5
- ^{xiv} Wielenga op.cit p. 39
- ^{xv} Wielenga op.cit p. 81
- ^{xvi} Moltmann op.cit p. 235