

**Last Sunday after Epiphany 20<sup>th</sup> January 2013**

*Sermon on Revelations 1, 9-18*

Pastor Peter Büttner, Fredelsloh

*On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which spoke to me:*

*I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man", dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.*

*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

*“On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit”*: The text of our second reading this morning is a text full of grandiose images, a description that makes a deep impression, conjuring up vivid scenes. A voice like a trumpet; brilliant light; the glitter of gold, whiteness like snow and a blazing fire; the sound of rushing waters, the sharpness of a double-edged sword. I can immediately see these things and hear these sounds before me. I stand there and hear behind me the stirring call of the trumpet. Startled, I turn round – and fall down. Both literally and figuratively. What I see is like nothing I have ever seen before. I see seven golden lampstands, and in the middle, among them, a person. It looks like a human being, with a long robe and a golden sash around its chest, like a priest.

Its hair is white like wool, as white as snow, dazzlingly white. White hair like the hair of people with the wisdom of old age. Its feet glow with the deep golden colour of brass melted in a furnace.

The face cannot be made out, because the eyes are like blazing fire and dazzle me. And then there are seven stars carried in a single hand, which glitter and shine.

And it seems – although among all the brilliance and fire I can’t really make it out properly – it looks as though there is a long, sharp sword coming out of the figure’s mouth, and pointing at me. That’s too much for me. I fall down, as if dead. It’s a fantastic story, a fantastic experience, a description full of superabundant imagination.

But this is no modern fantasy literature, no Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings; the text we heard read just now is much older. It was written by John, about 1,900 years ago. It is the

opening scene of the last book of the Bible, the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation of John.

The Revelation of John, or the Apocalypse of John, as this book of the Bible is also called. And that is quite remarkable: a revelation, in the language of today, is something I understand, something that has become clear to me; it is revealed to me.

But apocalypse, on the other hand, stands nowadays for something dreadful, for the end of the world. But in fact the word comes from the Greek, and means precisely: revelation. It is strange that the word has changed its meaning so much; because the revelation that is given to John is not one of a disaster, but one of a final, ultimate triumph.

This text has the same effect as a painting or a piece of music. It only reveals itself if one really “gets into it”: looks at it more closely, listens to it more carefully, or in this case, reads it more attentively.

Initially the text may seem merely glitzy, bombastic, outlandish. But as time has passed I have come to consider this brief text to be simply a stroke of genius, composed by a brilliant author. In these few lines, John has distilled the essence of the entire content of the Bible.

There is the sound of rushing waters. It reminds us of the waters over which the Spirit of God moved at the Creation; and of the waters that God sent in the time of Noah. And the Covenant that God entered into with humanity thereafter. And water is absolutely essential to survival, which in a dry country is particularly important. The source of life: that is what the voice of this figure sounds like.

The voice is also described as being like a trumpet: the voice of God is a clarion call, like the call that came to Moses out of the burning bush, imperious, penetrating, demanding attention. The long white hair is the hair of the elderly, to whom great wisdom is ascribed.

Thanks to the blazing eyes, it is impossible to make out the face. In this way, John complies with the prohibition of images in the original version of the Ten Commandments: You shall not make for yourself any idol in the form of anything on the earth. So the face is not described.

The tongue that looks like a double-edged sword brings us into New Testament territory. Paul uses this same image: the Word of God is like a double-edged sword that pierces bone and marrow. A double-edged sword was the most terrible weapon known: with a good weapon of this kind, a practised warrior could simply cut an opponent in two. This martial comparison with the Word of God indicates that that too can penetrate the human being, body and soul. Just like that. And then it can change people, sometimes totally.

The white robe recalls the angels that stood in the empty tomb and told Mary about the Resurrection.

And this brings us to the “Do not be afraid!” These are the words of the angels from the Christmas story, who appear to the shepherds and say “Do not be afraid! Today a saviour has been born to you!”

If we look more closely, we can see that there are many more images and allusions in this text: the seven lampstands, the stars in the figure’s hand, and so on, and so on.

So John has put in everything: the Creation, God's first Covenant with humankind at the time of Noah, the Ten Commandments, the birth of Jesus with the promise of salvation, the Resurrection and thus also the New Covenant that Jesus proclaimed at the Last (or First) Supper on the day before his arrest and crucifixion. The whole of the Old and New Testaments, reduced to their essence. Pure genius! And then there is the commission given to John himself. The text begins with the words:

*I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*

*On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."*

*I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man", dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.*

*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

John is commanded to write it all down and send it to the congregations of his churches. He had been banished to Patmos because of his belief. He is in despair, his position is hopeless. At that time there were already the first persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire. John is worried about the situation of the congregations and of the people that made up those congregations.

"Do not be afraid!" The hand of this figure, the hand of Jesus, the hand of God, is placed on his right shoulder, as if to bless him, and the voice says "Do not be afraid!" At this touch, he feels himself filled with warmth, with energy, with strength. There have been times when I have had sleepless nights because of thoughts that tormented me, and in such times I have longed for such a strong hand, a hand placed gently on my shoulder and a voice saying "Do not be afraid!"

I am sure many of you have experienced something similar, when you don't know how to carry on, when you have lost a loved one, when you have lost your job, when you have been to the doctor and he has diagnosed a serious illness.

"Do not be afraid!" That is something quite different from such trivial phrases as "Chin up", "It'll all be OK in the end" or the stupid "Everything will turn out for the best." No, here it is, "Do not be afraid!" I am with you, says God.

The illness does not go away because of that, it doesn't bring your job back, death does not lose its terror. But you are supported, strengthened, you are carried by your faith. You will hopefully have enough strength to get through this time without panic. Perhaps you will feel new strength flowing through you. Comfort gives you new heart. "Do not be afraid!" That is fantastic, in the best meaning of the word. The problem is that unfortunately Jesus does not appear to everyone, indeed he appears to hardly anyone as he appears to John in this vision. But what Jesus stands for, what he preached during his life, what the Bible tells us about the kingdom of God, that is something we can perceive.

We do not need the imagination of a fantasy writer to do this, only open eyes and ears, and open hearts, too. We do not have to be on the lookout and wait for trumpets and rushing waters, golden lampstands and double-edged swords. No, it's in the small things in life – how people behave towards each other – that's where we can sense the kingdom of God – a helping hand, a comforting word, a friendly look. Or just being there, close at hand when it is necessary. "Do not be afraid!"

This happens wherever people give comfort and support to one another, not only in difficult times but in good times too.

Doing something together to fend off loneliness.

This new world of God, this kingdom of God that Jesus here proclaims with the words "Do not be afraid!" is already here.

We only have to have eyes to see it – and sometimes do something ourselves to help bring it about.

And may the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in the knowledge of Christ Jesus, Amen