

AROUND THE THRONE

Genesis 2. 4b-9, 15-25

Revelation 4

Luke 8. 22-25

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Thrones represent power. Rulers – usually kings and queens – sit on thrones. Do you remember that scene in the Oscar-winning film, *The King's Speech*? The Duke of York, who is to become King George VI, is getting ready for his coronation. He has also discovered that his speech therapist, Lionel Logue, isn't a true doctor. They're standing in Westminster Abbey; and King George is going on a rant about how he's been deceived by Logue, and how the people of England deserve someone better than a king with a stammer. And then King George turns round and discovers that Lionel is sitting on the Stone of Scone, which was originally used at the coronation of monarchs in Scotland. King George goes ballistic. He says to Logue, 'You can't sit there, that is the Stone of Scone!' And Lionel answers, 'It's just a chair.' King George is outraged. It's not just a chair; it is the seat of authority and power; and it belonged to a long-gone king. Eventually Logue gets up, helps King George find his voice, and the film continues. But the point has been made: thrones are special; they are almost sacred things. They aren't meant for just anyone; they are meant for royalty. They symbolise the seat of power.

The book of Revelation is without parallel in the New Testament. It is a revelation that comes from our Lord to John; and in our appointed reading for today, John turns his eyes towards heaven, walks through a 'door standing open' and gives us a peek at the life to come.

Along with John, we find ourselves in the *throne room* of heaven: a place full of dazzling light; spectacular colour; twenty-four elders; and those four interesting living

creatures who sing God's praises day and night. John picks up imagery from the Old Testament, particularly from Ezekiel¹ and Isaiah², and brings the visions that they saw a few steps closer to completion.

Whereas Ezekiel had dared to describe the vague outlines of a human form on the throne in his vision of God, John's vision simply notes that there is someone seated on the throne, and he compares that figure with jasper and carnelian; and the rainbow that surrounds it is like emerald.³

The throne is encircled by twenty-four other thrones, occupied by elders clad in white and with crowns on their heads. These elders are not angels; they are human symbols, representing the people of God, or the 'kingdom of priests';⁴ and they form the divine court.

The noise and the fire that proceed from the throne are reminiscent of God's descent on Mount Sinai to give the Law to Moses. There are seven lamps before the throne, and John tells us that these are the seven spirits of God.⁵ In front of the throne is a sea of glass.

John's gaze returns to the throne, and the terrible creatures that appear there are described. Like the elders, the creatures recur throughout the vision given in Revelation, as part of the description of the throne⁶ and as part of the worship of God.⁷ Whereas the creatures (seraphim) described in Ezekiel have four faces each, John sees four different creatures: a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle.⁸

¹ Cf. Ezek 1 and 10.

² Cf. Is 6. See also the theophany in Ex 19. 16.

³ These jewels are three of the twelve representing the tribes of Israel on the high priest's breastplate (Ex 28. 17-21). Here they represent the radiance of God.

⁴ Cf. Rev 1. 6. They are the heavenly counterpart of the earthly Church.

⁵ Cf. Zech 4. 2, 10; Rev 5. 6.

⁶ Cf. Rev 5. 6ff, 7. 11, 14. 3, 15. 7, 19. 4.

⁷ Cf. Rev 4. 9, 14. 3.

⁸ Cf. the four beasts in Dan 7. 4ff. They symbolise the whole created cosmos.

Another difference is that John's creatures have six wings and are full of eyes, representing insight and knowledge.⁹ They engage in ceaseless praise, echoing the song of the seraphim that appeared in Isaiah's vision:¹⁰ 'Holy, holy, holy the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come. The praise is a praise of God's being: God is Almighty, past, present and future.

And when Jesus the Lamb of God appears alongside the Father (as he does in the next chapter of Revelation, chapter 5),¹¹ the elders cast their crowns before the throne,¹² singing, 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.'

Worship plays a central role in the book of Revelation. Chapter 4 is one of the first of several passages in the book to describe the worship of God in heaven, and it leads us to draw three conclusions about our own worship of him here on earth.

Firstly, this scene of divine worship is all-encompassing. Everyone who is present in this scene participates in the praise of God; and the worship is not expressed just in verbal or intellectual terms. As we read and reflect on Revelation 4, we should be encouraged to worship God here at St Stephen's with all of our being, and in spirit and in truth.

Secondly, in this divine scene of worship, hymns are sung only to God and in praise of his being. There are no divided loyalties in this scene. The heavenly worship described here is incompatible with idolatry, or the worship of something or someone else.¹³ And as we reflect on this, we realise that an appropriate pattern of

⁹ Cf. Rev 2. 18, 5. 6; Zech 4. 10.

¹⁰ Cf. Is 6. 3.

¹¹ Cf. Rev 5. 6-8.

¹² As vassal kings removed their crowns when coming into the presence of the emperor, these kings lay their diadems of victory before their Lord: their victory and their glory were from him. The language reflects imperial court ceremonial.

¹³ Cf. Rev 14. 11.

behaviour is expected from worshippers of God. They will be committed to a particular style of life. One cannot have true worship without doing the works of God.¹⁴

When worship becomes an escape from life and from witness, it has lost touch with God. There is always a temptation to allow worship and churchgoing to be ends in themselves. Yes, of course, worship can be a haven from the rigours of everyday life; but if worship does not encourage us to take up the discipline of an alternative way of life, it is not serving God's purposes.

Finally, and more positively, this divine scene of worship is a glorious vision of God that has been given to John. His vision is not an avoidance of reality; it is not an escape from reality; it is *another way of perceiving divine reality*. Our hope, and our goal, is that our worship at St Stephen's will indeed give us another way of seeing God and who he is.

For the reality is that the Throne in heaven represents the power of one who has no equal here on earth. It is the seat of God's authority. It is also the seat of the Lamb Victorious, the one who defeated Satan and death. Throughout the book of Revelation, the Throne will continue to represent the dwelling-place of God. Worship takes place around the Throne; voices come from the Throne; and we are even told that the river of living water will pour out from the Throne.¹⁵ And our *current reality* is that because of Christ, the great high priest who has passed through the heavens, we can approach the Throne and receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.¹⁶ Our Lord, The Lamb of God, has opened the way back to the Throne. He brings our hearts to the Throne, where we all join in the worship of heaven. Amen.

¹⁴ Cf. 1 Jn 3. 18.

¹⁵ Cf. Rev 22. 1.

¹⁶ Cf. Heb 4. 14-16.