

Grace and peace to you from the One who is, who always was, and who is still to come - the Alpha and Omega - the beginning and the end, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A vision of Christ

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ On the LORD's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹ 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." ¹² I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

Dear congregation!

Many times, over the centuries the book of Revelation has been used as a crystal ball to predict the end of time, accompanied by doom and gloom. But by now, many "last days" have come and gone, not only leaving the so-called codebreakers disillusioned, but especially undermining Revelation's true purpose as a pastoral letter, meant to encourage and sustain the suffering and hearten the weary faithful. The people listening as one of their church leaders reads John's letter are

worn down and disheartened. They were hanging on by a thread as they were viciously persecuted by the Roman emperor Domitian and many wondered if they made a bad choice by throwing in their lot with a Jesus they have never seen. Yet, these people daily and dangerously lived by faith and not by works, in hope and not in despair, by love and not by hate. And they were daily tempted to quit. John is their pastor, or, as he says, "Your brother, who shares in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus." (Peterson, E.H. 1991:7) So John, though a prisoner on the island Patmos, has work to do, carrying out his pastoral work, telling "the mystery" among the communities of worshiping, working, suffering Christians in Asia. And the common denominator in John the prisoner on the island Patmos and John the pastor is Christ, in vision and reality.

It follows then, that the Revelation is, in the first place, not information about the bad world we live in, not a crystal ball to predict the end of time, nor is it a report on the first century church under persecution. First of all, it is a proclamation by and about Jesus Christ. Items regarding the future and the past are introduced as far as they are useful in providing material that is pointing to Christ. The Revelation is nothing if not focused on Jesus Christ. Christ is the centre. The Revelation gives us a last word on Christ, and the word is that Christ is centre and at the centre. We can understand nothing if we do not have a centre.

John's focus and attention is drawn to the centre that is Christ. And he draws our and the early church's attention to this centre. In the stillness of a Sunday morning in prayer, John hears a trumpet and then a voice like the sound of rushing waters. Who is speaking? The words, "I turned to see the voice", fix our attention. The Son of Man vision is presented to John in a familiar context: "I saw seven lampstands".

Perhaps it was a menorah, like this one. Originally, the Menorah was a seven-branched candelabra beaten out of a solid piece of gold that served as one of the sacred vessels in the Holy Temple. As its unique design communicates, the Menorah endures as a symbol of Divine light spreading throughout the world. The six branches are guided by the centre branch of Divine light. The lamps of the menorah were lit daily starting from the lamp in the centre. This central lamp is used to light the other lamps. This is also very significant for our faith. We cannot light ourselves. We need the Light in the centre to light and enlighten us! After the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the temple was destroyed, and the true centre of the menorah lamp began to shine throughout the whole world, that is Christ. For it is God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, Paul says in 2. Cor 4:6

And in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man." This is a very encouraging and comforting vision indeed! Christ is with His church! More than that, He is amongst us, His people, present with his face like the light of the sun. He is present as our High Priest, "dressed in a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest." His head and hair as white as wool and snow and his flaming eyes show that this high priest gives evidence that all is pure between us and God and that God is himself pure and purifying. The bronze feet and double-edged sword show us that Christ is present among us with His strength and His authority through His Word. Christ does not come with the sword (remember, he ordered Peter to put his sword away for good). Christ comes with the Word, which is like a sword. Christ's words are not limp. They cut through wilful resistance, divide good from evil, overcome rebellion, and establish righteousness. The power that the world acknowledges comes from the mouth of a gun; the power that the person of faith respects comes from

the mouth of Christ. (Peterson, E.H. 1991:37+38)

The seven stars in His hand are the seven planets, showing that Christ is in control of destiny. The planets do not control us, Christ controls the planets. He is the Lord of the whole universe! It's as simple as that. So, the vision of Christ that John had is beautiful, and it elaborates on Christ's being and what He does, how He is present in our midst and in the world. "And his face was like the sun shining in full strength." God in Christ is warmth and sunlight. We do not live in darkness, but in light. We are not cursed, we are blessed. Light, not darkness, is the fundamental reality in which we live. What a wonderful message of encouragement and reassurance for us today on the last Sunday after Epiphany. We are reminded again of the Light that has come and is shining in and among us! And does that not also remind us of the blessing we receive every Sunday: The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you..." Yes, we are blessed indeed!

And as John the pastor was writing to the weary and troubled congregations in Asia to encourage and sustain them in their faith in Christ, so these encouraging and uplifting words come to us today as a congregation in Port Elizabeth as well, to uplift and encourage and sustain us! As I said earlier, John's vision of Christ is presented in a familiar context, with Christ appearing amongst seven lampstands, something that John was familiar with. It is God's will to identify himself in revelation in the community of faith. Christ is believed to be glorious in the heavens. But He is received in the everyday environment of the church in the company of people who gather to worship and witness. Christ is not seen apart from the gathered listening, praying, believing, worshipping people to whom he is Lord and Saviour.

John sees the churches simply as lampstands: they are places where the light of Christ is shown. They are not themselves the

light. There is nothing particularly glamorous about churches, nor is there anything particularly shameful about them. They simply are. The churches of the Revelation show us that churches are not Victorian parlours where everything is always picked up and ready for guests: they are messy family rooms. Things can be out of order sometimes, for that is what happens where churches are lived in. They are not show rooms. They are living rooms. And if the people living in them are recovering sinners, there's going to be dirty laundry scattered about, handprints on the woodwork and mud on the carpet. Dirty lampstands do not extinguish the light of Christ! Neither does polished gold outshine Christ's light! Of course, it is better that we are neither of these things. It is better that we simply be there, unselfconsciously, and inconspicuously receiving and sharing the Light of Christ.

Church is not what we organize but what God gives. It's not the people we want to be with, but the people God gives us to be with. And above all, it is God's will that we have a church. That should be all the encouragement we need. And by these words in Revelation we are indeed encouraged today to take heart and not be discouraged by our difficulties as a small congregation struggling to make ends meet. That is not why we are here. We worry so much about how we are going to continue to exist and forget why we exist! We exist because of Christ; we exist because God wants us to be here; we exist because God wants to use us, that through us the light of Christ shines into our lives and into the dark world around us. It is Christ, our centre, who will guide and sustain us with His light into an unknown future. Especially in these confusing and trying times that we are living in, we need an awesome vision to see what our Christian faith is all about: it's about CHRIST, true man, and true God. He stands above all church orders, church laws, confessions and opinions and budgets! Christ is the centre and He wants to enter a personal relationship with us and with His church. He dwells right here with us, in us and among us. From this centre, we

are reminded that the Divine not only restores our strength for the earthly journey; it reminds us of where that journey is taking us and who is leading us with His light.

On seeing the Christ in this vision John falls in dead faint. But he is lifted to his feet by the reassuring words, "Fear not", the same words by which Peter's terror of the sea-storm was changed to trust, and Mary Magdalene's empty tomb panic was changed into excited witness. John, away from his churches, and concerned by lack of intimate knowledge of his people, sees the penetrating, attentive eyes of his Saviour. Weak from confinement, John sees the strong and steadfast feet of his Lord. Used to speak with authority John is now without a voice, but hears the authoritative voice of the Ruler of the church and world. Homesick for his congregations, John sees them held in the right hand of the great Shepherd. At the mercy of the political sword of Rome, John sees the Word of God proceeding sword like and not returning empty. Nearing the end of his life, John sees the presence of a radiating Christ throwing blessing on all.

Indeed, these words from John's magnificent vision of Christ are meant to encourage us today and meet us right in the place where we are at. We are encouraged to take heart, to not be afraid, to trust in the One who is present among us; the centre from which we live and have our being. When we think about and need to make decisions for our congregation today at our AGM, let us think and decide from this, our centre and remember why we exist. Let us take up our Lord's invitation to not be afraid, to trust in His guidance and bask ourselves in the true light, which is shining for us and will continue to do so on our onward journey into God's promised future.

And the Light of God that enlightens our minds and senses, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, guard our hearts and minds in Him, our centre, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.