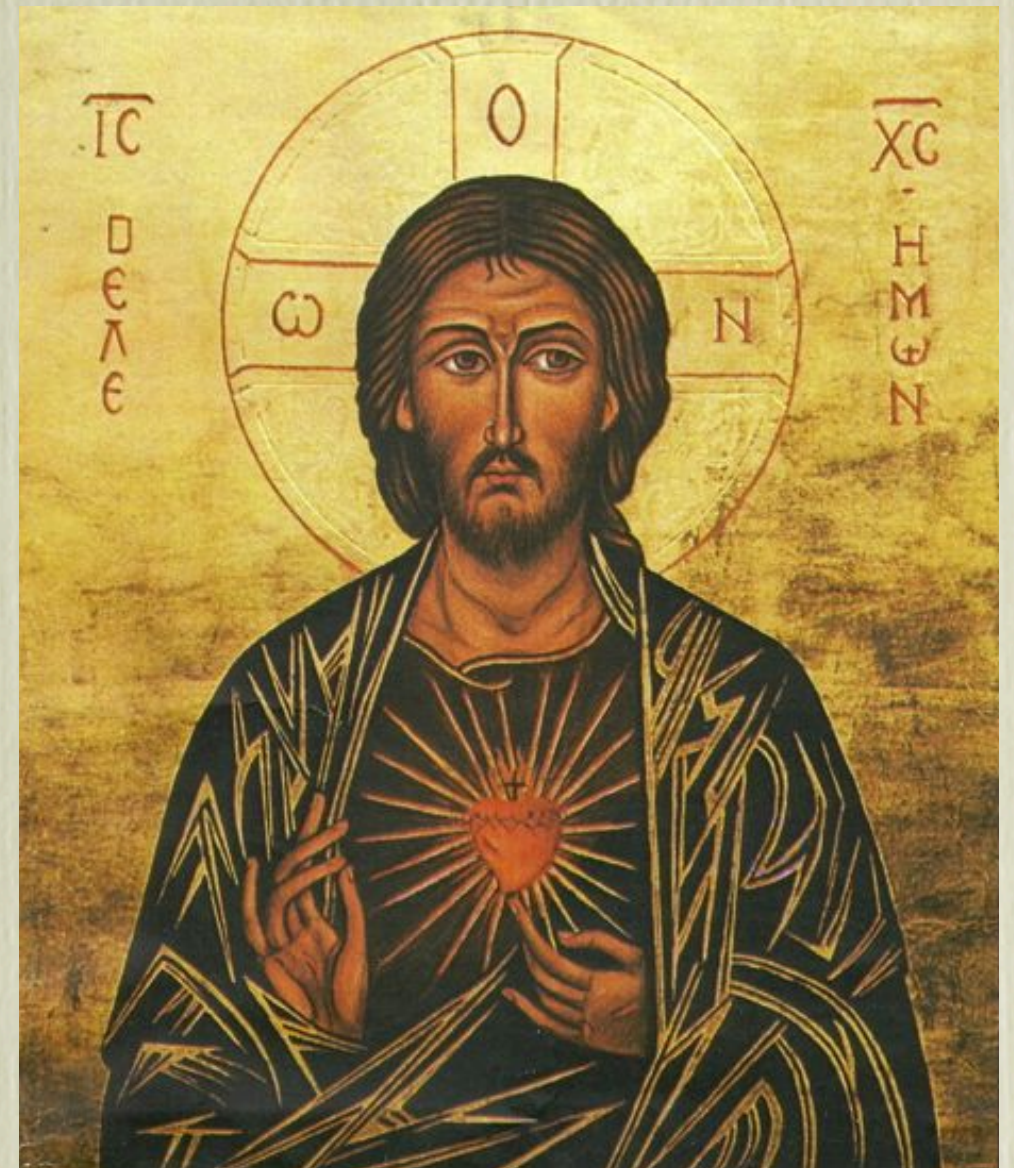


03. Penetrating to THE TRANSCENDENT (I)

Apocalypse 1:12-20

Christ the High Priest



Before focussing in Scene 1 on the situation of the communities in the Province of Asia (2:1 – 3:22), the author leads his audience to the plane of the presence and action of the transcendent God.

In this first ‘vision’ we ‘see’ the exalted Jesus, the lord of history, the high priest who is present in the church assemblies.

This powerful portrait is to remain before their eyes throughout, for it is his action in their lives that is the dominant one.



Apocalypse 1:12-13

Then I turned
to see [faith perception] the voice that was speaking to me,
and on turning I saw seven golden [divinity] lamp stands,
and in the midst of the lamp stands
I saw one like the Son of Man [Daniel 7].

‘John to the seven churches that are in Asia’ (1:4).

John declares that he could ‘see the voice.’ This expression ‘see the voice’ occurs forty-three times in the Apocalypse. The reference is not to a vision properly so called (one does not see a voice), but rather to a faith-perception, an inspired insight which is the fruit of mature Christian reflection.

Jesus, the 'Son of Man'

Daniel 7:9-10 'As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool ... The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

Daniel 7:13-14 'As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

Daniel 7:27 'The kingship and dominion ... shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.'

Son of Man

‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man’(John 1:51).

‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’(John 9:35)

‘The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost’(Luke 19:10).

‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life a ransom for the many’(Mark 10:45).

Come from God as judge. The oppressed are vindicated in God's judgment

‘The Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels’(Mark 8:38).

‘You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven’(Mark 14:62).

‘The Father has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man’(John 5:27).

‘Work for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you’(John 6:27).

The Son of Man and Suffering

‘The Son of Man must undergo great suffering’(Mark 8:31).

‘The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’(Matthew 8:20).

‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am.’
(John 8:28)

Apocalypse 1:13

In the midst of the lamp stands I saw one like the Son of Man

Both Daniel and the Apocalypse are concerned with judgment. For John, the ultimate judgment of what really matters is made by the exalted Christ. It might appear that the Roman Empire and the Jewish Synagogue were in a commanding position, leaving the Christian communities defenceless. The truth, however, is that Christ reigns and he will vindicate those united to him. The title 'Son of Man' expresses his commitment in solidarity to the poor, the broken and the persecuted. It expresses also that he and those with whom he identifies (including those to whom this work is addressed) will be vindicated by God.

Apocalypse 1:13

clothed with a long robe
and with a golden sash across his chest [high priest, Daniel 10];

Clothing has symbolic value for our author, representing the way in which the person wearing it relates to others. The long robe and the golden sash are priestly vestments, for his is a central mediatory role, uniting in his person the divine and the human and so able to draw the world into divine communion. He is the king-priest present in the sanctuary of the assembled Christian communities.



‘He made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father’(1:6)

Apocalypse 1:13

In the midst of the lamp stands I saw one like the
Son of Man [Daniel 7], clothed with a long robe
and with a golden sash across his chest

The churches, symbolised by the seven golden lamp stands, are divine sanctuaries in which people come to participate in the radiant splendour of the exalted Christ who is dwelling in the midst of his people. They are his instruments in effecting the reign of God on the earth.

Apocalypse 1:14-16

his head and his hair were white

as white wool, white as

his eyes were like a flame

his feet were like brass,

refined as in a furnace,

and his voice was like

the sound of many waters

In his right hand

he held seven stars, and

from his mouth came a

two-edged sword [Hebrew]

and his face was like the sun

shining with full splendour.



Love's Gazing

Apocalypse 1:14-16

his head and his hair were WHITE as white wool, white as snow;
his eyes were like a flame of fire,
his feet were like brass, refined as in a furnace,
and his voice was like the sound of many waters
In his right hand he held seven stars, and
from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword
and his face was like the sun shining with full splendour.

This marvellously rich symbolic portrait of the exalted Christ forms the backdrop to this first section of the Apocalypse; indeed, to the whole of the work. The risen Christ stands centre-stage. Everything is to be seen in the light of his active power in history. The prevailing colour here is WHITE. This first use establishes the significance of 'white' for the rest of the work. It symbolises the luminous splendour of the glorified Jesus who, through his resurrection, participates in divine glory.

Apocalypse 1:14-16

his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow;
his eyes were like a flame of fire,
his feet were like brass, refined as in a furnace,
and his voice was like the sound of many waters
In his right hand he held seven stars.

The head is the seat of vital energy and decision. It is white because the risen Jesus participates in the radiant splendour of God.

Jesus' eyes are portrayed as a 'flame of fire', for nothing is hidden from his purifying judgment. The feet symbolise strength and dominion. The sound of many waters expresses the power of his words; the right hand symbolises the power of his actions. Stars are associated with the realm of the transcendent. We see the exalted Christ holding in his hand seven stars, the communities viewed in their transcendent dimension, that is to say, seen as God sees them.

Apocalypse 1:16

from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword and his face was like the sun shining with full splendour.

Unlike the weapons with which the Roman legions subdue and oppress, the sharp two-edged sword issues from Jesus' mouth. His power is in his word. We recall the powerful eulogy of the word of God in the Letter to the Hebrews (4:12-13):

‘The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to his eyes. The word for us is towards him.’

Apocalypse 1:16

his face was like the sun shining with full splendour.

The Roman Emperors borrowed from the Egyptians the image of the sun in their claims of divinity. John is appealing to the Christians not to be seduced by this, but to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus.

We recall the words of Paul to the Corinthian church:

It is the 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 Christ'(2 Corinthians 4:6).

His face was like the sun shining with full splendour.

‘Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white’ (Luke 9:28-29).



Apocalypse 1:17

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.
But he placed his right hand on me, saying,
'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last.

His encounter with the exalted Jesus overpowers John who responds as one does to a theophany. Jesus, however, places his strong right hand upon him, and speaks words that echo words spoken by God through the prophet Isaiah:

'Do not be afraid ... I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god' (Isaiah 44:2, 62).

Apocalypse 1:18

I am the living one; I died, and see, I am alive forever and ever,
and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.

Christ died, it is true; but he is alive, and for ever, and can release whom he wills from death. The salvation offered by the Roman system is for this life only and it fails to satisfy our deepest yearnings. He has conquered death itself and promises life eternal. He will see that they live with him.

Apocalypse 1:19

Now write what you see,
what is and what is to take place after this.

John is commanded to write what he has seen, that is to say, what he has come to understand because of his communion with the risen Jesus. He is to write what is, that is to say, the judgment of Christ concerning the present state of the churches. He is commanded to write also what is to take place hereafter, that is to say, the immediate and ultimate destiny of the churches because of the transcendent influence of their exalted Lord.

Apocalypse 1:20

As for the **mystery** of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand,
and the seven golden lamp stands:
the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches
and the seven lamp stands are the seven churches.'

John introduces the word '**mystery**', for the revelation of John concerns the design of God, but it is expressed in symbolic language, and so needs to be interpreted with the aid of divine wisdom. John uses symbolism because his insights are into something that remains essentially mysterious. Those with whom he is sharing his prophecy can receive it only to the extent that they share in the awe and wonder of John's experience and have the wisdom to interpret his meaning. It is the same for us. For the most part the meaning of John's symbols is grasped from the context of his first use of them. Here he decodes two of his symbols: the stars and the lamp stands.

The assembled Christians are meant to apply the message of the Apocalypse to their own lives. This is John's primary focus.

The action of the exalted Christ, however, persists in history. And so, without looking for detailed expressions of our history in the Apocalypse, we too can receive its central message with something of the same awe, and, guided by the Spirit who inspired John, we can be led to insights that inform our own understanding as well.

SCENE ONE : LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES 2:1 - 3:22

1. Letter to the church in Ephesus : Apocalypse 2:1-7

Each of the seven letters is constructed according to the same pattern. To illustrate the pattern, this first letter is set out in full in the following slide.



Letter to the church in Ephesus : Apocalypse 2:1-7

1. The Glorified Christ addresses the community

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

**These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand,
who walks among the seven golden lamp stands:**

2. Christ's judgment of the community

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance.

**I know that you cannot bear evildoers; you have tested
those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false.**

**I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name,
and that you have not grown weary.**

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.

If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

4. General appeal and promise of victory if appeal is heeded

Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

**To everyone who conquers I will give permission to eat from the tree of life
that is in the paradise of God.**

Apocalypse 2:1

1. The Glorified Christ addresses the community

To the **angel** of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his **right hand**, who **walks** among the seven golden lamp stands:

‘the seven stars are the **angels** of the seven churches’ (1:20)

Ephesus has already been named as the first of the seven churches to which the Apocalypse is being addressed (see 1:11). The words of Christ are being addressed to ‘**the angel of the church**’, that is to say, to the Christian community as it really is, as seen by the transcendent, glorified Jesus (see 1:20), who is holding the community in his **right hand** (1:16), and is active in its midst (1:12).

Apocalypse 2:2-3

2. Christ's judgment of the community

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot bear evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false.

I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary.

John commends them on their patient endurance, for they are determinedly opposing those of the community who are in favour of compromising their faith by fitting in with the expectations of the citizens of Ephesus and taking part in the imperial cult.

Participation in the guilds and in the ordinary public life of Ephesus involved religious practices in which Rome and the Emperor were honoured as gods. The Jews had been granted official exemption from such practices. Christians, however, who were excommunicated from the synagogue, could not take advantage of this exemption. Failure to worship the Roman gods was considered antisocial, atheistic, and sporadically treated as treason. John is commending the community for not listening to those who were willing to compromise in this matter. He praises their endurance.

Apocalypse 2:4

2. Christ's judgment of the community

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

This echoes the words of Jeremiah (2:2):

‘Thus says the Lord, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.’

Apocalypse 2:5-7

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

Remember then from what you have fallen; **repent**, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the **Nicolaitans** which I also hate.

If the Ephesians do not repent they are in danger of having their lamp stand removed, thus forfeiting their privileged place among God's chosen people.

The Nicolaitans are the false apostles mentioned in verse two. Nikos is Greek for victory and laos is Greek for people. This may be a Greek rendition of the Hebrew Baal-am, which has the same meaning: the people of Baal, the Canaanite god of political power. To embrace Roman culture is to embrace a false god.

Apocalypse 2:7

4. General appeal and promise of victory if appeal is heeded

Let anyone who has an ear, ['Let anyone with ears, listen', Matthew 13:9] listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will grant to eat from the tree of life [the cross] in the paradise of God [Genesis 2:7,9; 3:22,24]

The tree of life and the paradise of God are familiar to us from the narrative of the garden of Eden. Scholars suggest that here and in the following letters John has chosen his language because of particular factors relevant to the community being addressed.

For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between John's imagery and the situation of the churches of Asia see C.Hemer The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting (Uni of Sheffield, 1986).

The temple to Artemis (the Roman Diana) in Ephesus was one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world. Its central shrine was an ancient tree-sanctuary, where fugitives from the law were able to seek and find asylum. John seems to be alluding to this when he speaks of the tree of life. The Christians in Ephesus are to find asylum (salvation), not in the temple of Artemis or in any of the other institutional pillars of the dominant Roman culture, but in the cross of Jesus. Their enjoyment of divine communion is to be found, not in fitting in with the religious practices of the local citizens, but in the love of God symbolised in the cross.