

Revelation 8:1-6 – Silence in Heaven

Pray Silence

Last Sunday, after the morning service, Liz and I went to the Colston Hall to listen to a concert given by the London Community Gospel Choir, along with the Jazz Festival Chorus. It was very good, but it was also very loud – very, very loud! Now if a dozen members of the London Community Gospel Choir, along with 150 members of the festival chorus can make such a loud noise that it is difficult to communicate with the person sitting next to you, think what heaven is like. Heaven, at least as it is depicted in the book of Revelation, is a very noisy place; it is filled with the praises of hosts of angels and of the redeemed.

But, in Revelation 8:1, at the opening of the seventh seal, we read "there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." And as the picture in Revelation 8 unfolds we see that in this silence an angel comes with a golden censer to offer up incense to God along with, or symbolising, "the prayers of the saints" (v.3). That is not the prayers of a small number of people whom Christians have reckoned to be especially holy, it is the prayers people like you and me. For all of those who have come to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ are called 'saints' in the New Testament; we have been sanctified, made holy, by the blood of Christ.

Now I want you to appreciate this wonderful picture. Amid all of the praise and clamour of myriads of angels and of Christians already gone to glory, Almighty God calls for quiet so that he can hear the prayers of his people. It is as if he says "Hush a minute, my people are praying. Be quiet, I want to hear their prayers." The praise of angels is precious to God, but even more precious to him are the prayers of his people.

What a wonderful picture. God stills the clamour of heaven to hear your prayer. He is even more anxious to listen to the cry of your heart than you are to pray. What an encouragement to our prayer.

The Opening of the Seals

But there is even more here for our encouragement.

God calls for silence in heaven when the seventh seal was opened. I want to remind you about this picture of the seven seals in the book of Revelation. These are not a group of aquatic mammals but seals or locks which are fastened to a scroll and which prevent it being unrolled, opened and read. We read of them first in Revelation 5. John writes:

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?' But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.' Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne... (Rev 5:1-6)

This scroll, written both on the front and the back – so no-one can add to it, is, I believe, a picture of the settled purposes of God for the redemption of the world – God's plans for the establishment of his kingdom. And the big question is this, Who can unfasten these seals and unroll the scroll? Who can accomplish God's great purposes for the redemption of the world; who can execute his plans for the establishment of his kingdom? Initially it seems that this is a task that no-one can accomplish, and, on hearing this, John breaks down in tears. But then he is told not to weep for there is someone, the only one, who can accomplish these things: it is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lamb who had been slain – it is the Lord Jesus Christ.

So all heaven joins in the song of praise to the Lamb:

'You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.' (Revelation 5:9-10)

And so the scroll is given into the hands of the Lamb who was slain but lives for ever, and he begins to open the seven seals. And it is as the Lamb opens the seventh seal, that is, before all that God purposes for the redemption of his people can be worked out in history, that there is this period of silence. And in this silence John sees an angel with a golden censer bringing the petitions of God's people before Almighty God.

Note carefully what we read here. John records that "the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake" (8:5). It is this action which gives rise to the sounding of the trumpets which will herald the unrolling of God's saving purposes. The fire on the altar is a symbol of the sacrifice that has been offered to God – it is the symbol of the Lamb's perfect sacrifice of himself for our sins. The prayers of God's people, mingled with fire from the altar have a powerful effect upon what happens on earth.

What I want you to see with me this evening is a truth that is as awesome as it is deeply challenging and demanding. **The engine that drives the purposes of God in history is the sacrificial work of Christ mixed with the prayers of God's people.** Our prayers play a vital role in the unfolding of God's plans.

Do we grieve over the state of the world in which we live? Let us cry out to God in prayer. Do we want to see the kingdom of God advancing? Let us make prayer a priority. The purposes of God are driven forward by the power of prayer and are grounded in the atoning work and risen power of the Lamb. Never underestimate prayer's effectiveness. The triune God calls for hush in heaven that he may hear our prayers. And he wants to hear them because he plans to act upon them.

Let me close with a poem by George Herbert in which, reflecting on this passage in Revelation, he speaks of the power of prayer.

Prayer the Churches' banquet, Angels' age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;

Engine against the Almighty, sinner's tower,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six days world – transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;

Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted Manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the souls blood,
The land of spices, something understood.

George Herbert (1593-1633)

Peter Misselbrook – Christ Church Downend, 26/3/2017