

NECMA Feb. 9th 2004

***Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The Holy One is here;
In Him no sin is found, we stand on Holy Ground;
Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The holy One is here.***

<slide - Introduction to the “Seven Churches of the Revelation”>

The word I bring I believe to be inspired of Him, and while I may not do it full justice, it is the Word of the Lord and has a bearing on society right now.

We are going to start with a quick look at a penal colony set up in San Francisco Bay about seventy years ago, before we go back in time and check the topic of the sermon.

<slide - Alcatraz Island slide - no caption>

It received its name in 1775 when a Spanish explorer charted the bay, naming this tiny speck of land “La Isla de Los Alcatraces”, which translates to “Island of the Pelicans”. It had little to offer, with its swift icy-cold currents, minimal vegetation, and barren ground.

<slide - Alcatraz Island - with caption>

In 1847 they created a military fortress to protect the community against gold smugglers, and in 1861 was used to house prisoners from the civil war. In 1898 the Spanish-American war increased the prisoner population from 26 to 450... and the history goes on from there into the era it is best known for, from 1934 when it opened as a penitentiary for the most incorrigible prisoners until 1963 when it closed due to its being too expensive to maintain.

<Alcatraz Movie poster slide 1>

I would suggest that most of us would know of it through books and movies created by authors with little regard for factual truth, preferring to paint their own agenda-driven interpretation. This is my case, when I felt led to do this comparison, for reasons I knew not why at the time.

Robert Stroud is a good example of the Alcatraz myth. In fact Stroud never kept a single bird while incarcerated on the Rock, despite books and movies made about him saying the opposite.

<Alcatraz Movie poster slide 2>

The so-called “Bird Man of Alcatraz” did all his studies and writing his books about birds while at Fort Leavenworth. He was moved from there to Alcatraz because of his violent temper and his having attacked and killed a guard. This earned him continual separation from the others, and

absolutely no privileges. So much for the story about the Bird Man of Alcatraz.

<slide - other Alcatraz Inmates>

Other well known inmates were Al Capone, Machine Gun Kelly, and Henry Young. The Alcatraz myth also includes spectacular escapes when in fact there were absolutely no successful ones. Those involved in all fourteen attempts were either (1) re-captured on the shore or in the water, (2) were shot and killed while attempting to leave, or (3) were drowned.

None reached the mainland alive. And no, the sharks in the bay are not man-eating, but the very cold tidal rips were!

You may ask why did we introduce the topic of the “Seven Churches of the Revelation” in this way.

First it got your attention.

Second it made the point that what people think they understand about a topic is often because they have taken someone else's word for it. A teacher, a friend, a movie, or a story they have read or been told.

Scripture should not be understood in this way... If something is in scripture, it has stood the test for nearly two thousand years in the case of the New Testament, and for a lot longer in the case of the Old Testament.

In writing to Timothy, the apostle Paul made the point that ALL scripture is good for teaching.

<slide - Aegean Sea map >

Here we see the location of another island prison facility from some seventeen hundred years earlier. The island of Patmos in the Aegean sea, just off the coast of what we now call Turkey, not very far from one of the largest congregations of early Christians, about which probably more has been written in scripture and in historical anecdote than any one other, Ephesus, whose deep water port of Miletus was where Paul met up with the local Ephesian elders on his third missionary journey.

<slide - Patmos island view >

This is not what Patmos looked like when John the disciple beloved of the Lord was imprisoned there. This is Patmos from the air as it looks now - John was imprisoned on what was then an uninhabited island, with no buildings; imprisoned for the same reason as the inmates at Alcatraz were - for being an incorrigible criminal in the eyes of the law at the time, whether or not we agree with what the law says.

Roman law was clear... they viewed treason seriously, and to be a Christian and/or to promote its beliefs was at varying times proscribed

as being treason. He was lucky not to be executed, as was another congregational leader, from Smyrna, a man in his eighties named Polycarp, who was burned at the stake.

<slide - John on sea shore>

The Romans charged that John had the audacity to encourage Christianity while at Ephesus - so aged in his nineties, he was shipped by them to the penal colony of Patmos, very different from modern prison facilities, there were no cell blocks - indeed no buildings, no food nor clothing provided, and probably no jailers... you were dumped on the shore and unshackled from your leg irons and left to fend for yourself for the rest of your days. Most prisoners found an empty cave and ate fish, birds, small animals and plant life. Interestingly, John was actually released back to the community two years later.

<slide - Patmos monastery>

While our Catholic brothers claim that John had his revelation of Jesus “while celebrating mass” on a Sunday, like most legends, including those about Alcatraz, there is only partial truth in that - merely that he had the revelation on a Sunday - which scripture tells us - and that he was there as a political prisoner.

<3 scripture slides>

Revelation 1:10 - 20

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, “Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle.

<change slide>

And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters.

And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.

<change slide>

And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the

last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.

“Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things. As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

We should also note that the book he wrote out of obedience is NOT called “Revelations” - the word is singular, and correctly is called “The Revelation of Jesus Christ” or “The Revelation of or to John” or “The Apocalypse of John” - which is a transliteration from the Greek “apokalypsis” meaning unveiling, disclosing or revealing.

<2 music introduction slides follow>

<change slide to 1>

Let us listen to part of a recording made in Den Haag in the Netherlands where we can hear John's prophetic words, sung in English by 260 Dutch singers, gloriously set to music,

<change slide to 2>

a part of a work chosen by eminent Dutch musician Hans Matla to celebrate 25 years as a conductor... and we can see the huge choir of 260 voices he trained, along with seventy other musicians and four top-line soloists presenting this message from the beginning of the Revelation...

<start CD track 1>

<slide-choir>

He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit's saying to the churches.

<slide-choir>

Listen to the trumpet, . listen to the trumpet sound. Hearken to the trumpet, hearken to the trumpet sound!

<slide-soloist>

To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life. To him that overcometh the same shall be clothed in raiment of white.

<slide-choir>

He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit's saying to the churches.

<slide-choir>

Listen to the trumpet, . listen to the trumpet sound. Hearken to the trumpet, hearken to the trumpet sound!

<slide-soloist>

To him that overcometh and keepeth My works unto the end, to him will I give the power to rule with an iron rod over the nations.

<slide-choir>

He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit's saying to the churches.

<slide-choir>

Listen to the trumpet, . listen to the trumpet sound. Hearken to the trumpet, hearken to the trumpet sound!

<slide-soloist>

To him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of God. And he will go out no more for I will write upon him the Name, the new name,

<slide-choir>

Which no man knows, but he who has received it, the Name of the Lord, and the name of the city of God, the New Jerusalem.

<slide-conductor-facing right>

<slide-choir>

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the New Jerusalem

<slide-conductor-facing left>

He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit's saying to the churches.

<slide-choir>

**Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the New Jerusalem
He that, she that, overcomes...**

<slide-back announcement>

<slide - "Introduction to the seven Churches of the Revelation">

Revelation 1:10, 2:7,11,26-27, 3:4,12

<slide - Seven Churches of the Revelation location map>

Jesus spoke straight from the shoulder to the angel - or the eldership - of each of the seven churches He named... the churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, doing so through His instruction to John to write to them on his behalf.

Why Jesus chose to address His remarks through John is a matter of speculation... my opinion, for what it is worth, is that He chose that way to continue His support for the apostolic authority which he himself had set up in the first place.

John would be believed by the Christians of the day when he stated that Jesus had personally visited him in vision. And let's make the point here that genuine visions do happen. My opinion is that when they do, they are for a reason... either for the person concerned, or more often for a section of the church to understand a specific message.

John writes of those seven churches as the seven candlesticks or light bearing bodies, lots of people think they represent the wider church as well as those specific groups of saints, and importantly we note that the Lord was still in their midst, notwithstanding Jesus' displeasure with each of them.

Many of us also believe that over the last few decades a lot more has come together in God's jigsaw - but let us never speculate when He is going to make His decision... it is His, not ours to make, high profile preachers who tell us the heretical thought that God is actually waiting on us to allow him to wind it all up.

You look surprised. There is a group of preachers who do teach exactly that. And sadly, they have many followers in this city.

The surprising thing is, that in spite of the Lord being in the midst of the seven churches, each is totally different one from each other. Put them together into one body and the sum is a picture of the overall church today.

All of its good points and all of its bad ones become glaringly evident. The diversity of problems and spiritual benefits cannot be found in any one church anywhere in the world today. The nature, the character, the attitude and the atmosphere of these seven churches is scattered throughout the whole modern church world.

Just as He was still with each of the seven, so just as we ourselves, as imperfect, and as failed as we are, do have Jesus still with us, encouraging us, because the time of the end has not yet arrived.

We can look and find traces of the spirits of the seven churches in each and every present day church. Out of this muddle the Lord will develop the church of His desires. She will be that glorious church, perfect in all her ways "without spot or blemish" as scripture says.

<slide - title page of the Revelation>

We can discuss the ups and downs, the good and bad, of each of those seven churches in some detail over two consecutive Sundays next month. I promise you we shall find it an interesting topic, and if we can take away a tiny bit of understanding of how we as a church who loves God can unwittingly get out of step with Him, then the preparation will have been worth it.

This is an exciting thing to talk about... it is inextricably tied in with the Body of Christ and how it functions - or does not function, as the case may be - so we should also examine that as we go too.

<slide - title page of Daniel>

Some people say that the Book of Revelation is unintelligible. If you ask them about its equivalent in the Old testament, the Book of Daniel, they will likely say that is also. I don't say that it is fully transparent in its meaning... either to me, or to you... but by careful and prayerful reading, bits of it - large bits of it - make sense and can fit together like a jigsaw.

As with a real jigsaw, the bits that are left eventually find their place - and in the end, we discover we have a fully interlocked picture... worth a thousand words, as they say... even if there were 1000 individual pieces that we would have despaired about last week!

I have found that often those who say the book is all allegorical and poetic and whatever have made a conscious choice not to bother with it, which is sad. What did Paul say? 2 Timothy 3:16-17 NASB

<slide - 2 Timothy 3: 16>

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

That does not mean just the 64 books that exclude Daniel and Revelation.

It means ALL scripture.

All 66 books of the Old and New.

In the Book of Revelation, we see the order of the heavenly, eternal kingdom of God.

Remember that Jesus Christ himself told John to write what he saw, for posterity to read... not to dream about and wonder if its too hard. Were they more learned in those days? I think not. There is probably little difference between the saints then and the saints now.

<slide - "Introduction to the seven Churches of the Revelation">

About 15 years ago I preached at the night service at Tea Tree Gully about "The Great Commission", and in it we did a study comparing the then situation in Australia with that in Asia Minor 1900 years earlier.

We looked at trade routes. We looked at nations who ruled over other nations, and occupied their lands, and their intolerance one to another. Apart from different technology, there was little real difference between the sports mad Romans and Greeks of that era with the sports-mad Australians and South Africans of the later era.

After the introduction to the Book, Jesus shows us at great length, using John to describe what he saw with his own eyes, the final destruction of those who are in opposition to the Lord.

Christ wants you and me to obtain and be involved in the blessing that is promised in the book of Revelation.

Read it.

Read it again and again, until its pages begin to come to life in your life. Importantly, we need to remember there is a blessing in it.

<slide - The Eternal One>

THE ETERNAL ONE. The Lord Jesus Christ

<slide - Which Is>

WHICH IS, eternal, He is always present in the now. Go where you will, forward or backward in time, He is the present one the now.

<slide - Which Was>

WHICH WAS, unchanging, He always has been. There has never been a moment of eternity where he did not rule and exist.

The Lord is the only constant in eternity. From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. Ps 90:2

<slide - Which Is To Come>

WHICH IS TO COME.

Endless, everlasting. The future is all wrapped up in Him. He is very existence. Nothing can exist without him. By Him all things consist and exist. Col. 1:17 The force that maintains the universe is found in Him. When we are in Him and He is in us the whole of the force and power of eternal life dwells within. We become as eternal as He.

The message of the Revelation comes from the Lord Jesus. In the prophetic utterance of Micah (5:2) concerning the coming of the king who would rule Israel, one sees His eternal being. Whose goings forth or origins have been from everlasting. Time beyond recall or eternal.

ENLIGHTENMENT, WHILE INTERNED FOR JESUS SAKE.

John set a beautiful example for those who may be called upon in these last days to know persecution, even internment and perhaps death. His secret was to be found in his spirituality. He "was in the Spirit" - like Paul and Silas were. A high state of Spirituality is the supreme priority for all who really want to know and understand the Lord. Rev. 1:10

John heard.

He had ears to hear what was about to be said to him.

He did not hear a trumpet sounding but rather a voice with the volume of a trumpet. What he was about to receive from the Lord was not just for himself, but he was commissioned to write and send the message to the churches of that day. However, the message of the Revelation was not just for them but reaches down to the end of the age. We are living in the day of the fulfillment of the prophecies of the book.

<slide - John Saw Jesus...>

JOHN SAW JESUS IN ALL OF HIS GLORY AND SPLENDOR.

All his qualms about this being the voice of the Lord Jesus vanish when He introduced Himself to John as being the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last. Rev. 1:11 NIV

The one who is all and in all. Everlasting and eternal, God. John saw Him standing as the son of man, in the midst of His church, the seven branched lampstand. The body of believed who are responsible for carrying the light of the Gospel to the whole world. Jesus appeared to him as the great high priest with His royal priestly garment reaching to His feet. He is Lord and ministers in a dual office as Priest and King. He is therefore clothed appropriately. In all dignity and honor. His sash of gold portraying His eternal Deity and Kingship. Rev. 1: 12-13

John's attention goes to His head which is as white as wool, as white as snow. The Lord Jesus crowned with the fullness of the glory and purity which is the eternal nature of the Lord.

Righteousness and holiness manifest as His nature and being. His eyes as blazing fire, piercing, seeing within that which is hidden from human eyes. Bringing condemnation to the sinner, but joy and love to the saved. He will try the hearts of all men with just a glance. His feet as burnished brass yet glowing with the heat of the melting pot. Judgment is in His hands. He will tread the winepress of the wrath of the Almighty. Rev. 19:15

But again, to the redeemed He will make the place of His feet to be glorious. Isa. 60:13

His voice, how soothing and marvelous to those who love Him. Like the song of a babbling brook, most pleasant and relaxing. But to the sinner, a fearsome and awesome sound of impending doom. The seven stars, the leaders of the seven churches held safely and securely in the hollow of his right hand. The living sword, the declaration of the Word of God. The Word spoken with faith and power, effective and cutting like a two edged sword. Rev. 1:14-16

His face, glowing with the full strength and power of a noonday sun. He is the receptacle of the fullness of the Godhead and therefore that radiance of light and glory shine froth from within Him. As Deity it is His right and privilege to be filled with all the fullness of the ever living Lord.

He will shine as the most brilliant of all lights among a people, His saints who are also recipients of His light.

The message to the seven churches, which includes us, is very clear. Are we listening?

Are you and I listening? After all, He is talking to us. He says it seven times, the way of scripture to reinforce the message to us.

He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit's saying to the churches. Listen to the trumpet, listen to the trumpet sound. Hearken to the trumpet, hearken to the trumpet sound!

To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life. To him that overcometh the same shall be clothed in raiment of white.

To him that overcometh and keepeth My works unto the end, to him will I give the power to rule with an iron rod over the nations.

To him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of God. And he will go out no more for I will write upon him the Name, the new name, which no man knows, but he who has received it, the Name of the Lord, and the name of the city of God, the New Jerusalem.

He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit's saying to the churches. Listen to the trumpet, listen to the trumpet sound.

Ron's selection for a closing song is so very appropriate. You know God works on each of us to be a team, whether or not we realise it at preparation time. I should not be, but I am astounded every time I prepare the Word to share at the way it all works together for His glory...

***Praise to the Lord,
The Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!
All ye who hear,
Now to His temple draw near;
Join me in glad adoration!***

His temple is here. Not the building. But Us.

His Body. Fragmented as it is.

He that hath an ear, let him hear.

Saturday, 07 February, 2004