

The whore of Babylon: Revelation ch.17

Today we come to the end of our readings from the book of Revelation, before beginning the Advent Calendar readings next week. Here is Robin's reflection on one of the book's most powerful and disturbing images, depicted here in the famous West Window of York Minster



The vision of the whore of Babylon who appears in John's vision riding the seven-headed beast, is a vision of the way in which the powers that oppress humanity develop a culture of consumption and exploitation which fascinates people and draws them in, even as it exploits them. In the vision, the culture that rides on the oppression is destroyed and the people of God are set free from it.

A sex worker sells his or her body for the sexual gratification of another. This other has to have the wealth to pay. The wealth to pay gives the power to determine what happens next. The whore is therefore a symbol of exploitation and excessive consumption in which the needs of many are sacrificed for the pleasure of the few. John's vision extends to the whole supply chain that feeds the luxurious living of Babylon, including the trade in human beings.

Why Babylon? Surely the centre of oppression and excessive consumption

in John's day was Rome? We can be sure that Babylon stands for Rome. John gives us a massive clue, 'This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated' (Rev 17:9). Rome is famously the city on seven hills. And also 'The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.' (Rev 17:18). This can only be Rome. We think John disguised his meaning because it was so dangerous to write against Rome. And so, he picked the name Babylon, the city of the first empire to conquer Jerusalem.

Because as well as being a whore, Babylon is a city. A city at the centre of an international trading system based on exploitation and fornication. A city that is destroyed. And, of course, later in Revelation John is shown a new city, the new Jerusalem, 'coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (Rev 21:2). So this city is also presented as woman, but not a whore, a bride. This new Jerusalem is a pure city ready to give itself to Christ.

John admits he is fascinated by the whore. He writes, 'when I saw her I was greatly amazed.' (Rev 17:6). In fact, the kings and the inhabitants of earth are in thrall to her. And when she is destroyed, they weep and mourn for her. (Rev 18:9-11). Such is the power of the whore and everything she represents. The angel has to pull John's attention away from the whore by explaining what she really stands for.

I sympathise a little with John. I live over the road from the Piccolino restaurant which has established itself as the place to gather in Alderley Edge if you are young and beautiful, successful, talented and rich. Or so it appears. Sometimes on a Friday or Saturday night (not at the moment of course) I will be coming home and find myself sharing the pavement with young women who are carefully wearing very little as the supercars roar

past on the road. I find myself, 'greatly amazed' by the women and the cars. I stop myself from staring by reminding myself what these things stand for; conspicuous consumption, the flaunting of power, the willingness to exploit others and be exploited.

At Piccolino's it is the women who are stared at. They are the ones who are dressed in ways that 'leave little to the imagination'. The young men are rather demurely dressed in comparison. Their flaunting is in the demonstration of wealth and power, communicated by their cars.

It's usually women who take on the role of whore. It is usually a female whore who represents fornication and abomination. And we encounter female whores throughout Scripture.

The prophet Hosea marries a prostitute when God tells him to 'Go take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.' (Hosea 1:2). Hosea's wife becomes a symbol for the infidelity of Israel. Hosea marrying her is a symbol of God's faithfulness to Israel.

Telling the story of the faithlessness of Israel through a woman's sexuality finds another expression in the stories of Jezebel. Jezebel is the highly sexual foreign wife of King Ahab and she uses her power to draw him away from the one true God. (1 Kings 16:31) She becomes the implacable foe of the prophet Elijah.

But sometimes whores are heroes. Rahab, the woman who plays such a key role in Joshua's capture of Jericho, is described as a prostitute (Joshua 2:1) although there is some dispute about the accuracy of this translation. She comes across as an independently minded woman willing

to take risks. And Esther replaces Vashti as the 'favourite' of King Ahasuerus when Vashti refuses to perform a dance to please the king and his courtiers. Esther became the favourite because she 'pleased' the king and if she hadn't been the favourite, she wouldn't have been in a position to protect the Jewish people from their enemies.

But in the Revelation of John there are no hero-whores. Indeed, in John's vision, Jesus castigates the church in Thyatira for tolerating a Jezebel in their midst. (Rev 2:20). Later, when the 144,000 who have been saved are worshipping the lamb, we are told that they 'have not defiled themselves with women', (Rev 14:4). And then we meet the whore of Babylon, whom we then contrast with the presumably chaste bride of the New Jerusalem.

Why are the symbols of sexual impurity always women? Why is it the women who are condemned as whores when fornication takes place? Can we take this seriously as a revelation of Christ?

Remember that astonishing passage in John 8 when the Pharisees bring a woman to Jesus who has been caught in the act of adultery? The man who was presumably also caught in the act was not brought before Jesus. The Pharisees only planned to stone the woman. But when Jesus suggested that the man who was without sin should be the one to cast the first stone, the crowd of men melted away. Millenia of injustice melted away with them. Sometimes the imagery of John's Revelation appears to me to re-introduce it, by the back door as it were.

But let's leave that aside. The meaning of the text is this: The powers that oppress us present us with a culture of consumption and exploitation which fascinates us and draws us in. But in the vision of John, this culture will be destroyed, and we will be liberated from it. Thanks be to God!

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