

The Seven Seals and the Four Horsemen

Read aloud Revelation 6:1-17

Okay, this is where things get a little weird. And ugly. And dark. You may have heard the phrase “the four horsemen of the apocalypse” used as a sign that the end times are coming, and that the end times will be particularly bleak. That phrase and that idea comes from this section of scripture.

After worship in the throne room, do we really need to read about all of this misery?

Read Wright aloud:

Sorry, but we do need to. Unless we lay out the problems to their full extent, no real healing can take place. Unless the ills of the world are brought out, shown up in their true colours, put on display and allowed to do their worst, they cannot be overthrown. Unless the four horsemen ride out and do what they have to do, the scroll cannot be read. The victory of the lion-lamb will not be complete.

This is the answer (like all answers to do with Revelation, it remains partial and puzzling: this is a book designed to go on making you ponder and pray, not one designed to answer everything to your satisfaction) to the problem that many readers have when they get to Revelation 6. We have just celebrated the magnificent scene in the throne room with the whole of creation singing a glorious, thunderous hymn of praise to the creator God and to the slaughtered lamb. We have celebrated the fact that he has won the victory: now God’s plan to rescue the whole world can go ahead! So, surely, all we have to do is to turn the page and there we will find . . .

And there we will find that the dark powers of evil are given their head. Things have to be exposed before they can be dealt with. Things have to come to the light before the surgeon can perform the operation. Ancient memories of guilt and sorrow must be raked up, however painfully, before they can be prayed through and healed. Revelation is, as it were, a cosmic version of the tough pastoral struggle over the deeply wounded soul. The soul of the world is aware of immediate problems and pains; but unless we look deeper, to the ancient patterns of conquest, violence, oppression and death itself we shall not begin to understand what needs to be done if the world is to be healed, really healed rather than merely patched together for a few more years.

Thus, when the lamb opens the first four seals on the scroll, instead of four glorious remedies for the world’s ills we find the four living creatures summoning four horses and riders, each (so it seems) to make matters worse. (The four strange horsemen owe something to Zechariah’s visions in his chapters 1 and 6, but are here given quite a new role.) The first, the white horse with the rider and his bow, is sometimes supposed to be the Messiah himself, on the basis of the partial parallel in 19.11. This is not impossible, but I think it’s more likely that he symbolizes the

conquering kings of the earth who have charged to and fro, overcoming mighty nations and claiming sovereignty (the 'crown') over them. What happens when the 'seals' are opened is that the forces of human conquest and oppression are allowed to do their worst, before the divine purpose, which is to deal with the world's ills, can be read from the scroll.

This fits well, too, with the second, third and fourth horsemen. The second, the fiery red horse whose rider takes from the earth even the superficial appearance of peace, is well known in every century. The black horse, third in line, signifies the economic problems which so often lie at the root of violence within and between nations. Ordinary commodities, the staple diet of poor people, shoot up in price; luxury items, oil and wine, stay the same, allowing the rich once more to get richer at the expense of the poor. The pale horse, carrying Death on its back and with Hades, the abode of the dead, as a personified creature following behind, is the ultimate threat of every tyrant and every anarchist. Human history records that again and again war, famine and a thousand other things have carried people off before their time.

These four are the basic ills which humans inflict upon one another. They charge off around the world, and must be allowed to do this in order that the saving message of the scroll can have its full effect. I have suggested, and we must follow this through in due course, that they are allowed to do their worst because the problems they represent need to be tackled head on, not sidestepped. For too long, over the last century at least, mainline Western churches have healed the wounds of the human race lightly, declaring 'peace, peace' when there is no peace except at the superficial level. We have been unwilling to look below the surface and see the dark forces at work. But if God's new creation is to be brought to birth, the deepest ills of the old one must be exposed, allowed to come out, and be dealt with (60-62).

Optional Discussion Questions:

1. What pain(s) in the world has the Church ignored or avoided addressing? Why do you think that is?
2. What pain(s) in the world are you tempted to ignore? Why?