

It's not often that we take a look at the startling imagery that fills the Book of Revelation. But seeing as this reading has been chosen for today in the Season of Creation lectionary that we follow, here we are, trying to wrap our heads around thrones, thunder and lightning, giant winged beasts with eyes, flames, a sea of glass, and the unceasing worship of the elders casting their crowns before the one who lives for ever and ever.

The person who had this vision is obviously trying to describe something utterly indescribable using language that won't really do the job. The area in front of the throne is "something like" a sea of glass, like crystal. The four living creatures are "like" a lion, an ox and so on, but they are clearly not those animals, being also covered with eyes "in front and behind, all around and inside," and each having six wings. The One on the throne looks "like jasper and cornelian," which are kinds of opaque crystals, the voice that calls to the writer is "like a trumpet." Which is to say, whatever this visionary saw and heard, it was probably as much "unlike" the way it's being described as is it "like" it.

All we can really affirm about this vision is that in some realm, the Creator of All is worshipped unceasingly, with utter devotion and adoration, by beings who are themselves some kind of extraordinary emanation of the Mystery at the heart the universe. This realm is all at once ground and air, sea and fire, physical and spiritual. The worship flows from the eye-covered living creatures, and we get the impression that there's something that these beings are 'seeing' with all their eyes that is constantly renewing their praise of the One on the throne. And, taking their lead from the living creatures, the elders, who I take to be representative of redeemed humanity, fall down before this same One and "cast...down their golden crowns" before the throne.

Of course, you'll recognise that the song of praise constantly occurring around the throne is the same one from Isaiah's vision that was used in Jewish worship for centuries and then became one of the earliest parts of our eucharistic liturgy: "holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come." It has been the belief of our Church since the earliest days that when we gather to praise God in the Eucharist, we are caught up in this everlasting song that is offered day and night in this realm of indescribable majesty and splendour.

It is impossible to use normal words to describe these things. Only poetry and song and art could ever come close to taking us into the heart of this vision – and even then, only with the Divine Spirit transforming our brain pixels to take in wonders beyond our imagining. Poor old St John, seeing these marvels in the form of a spiritual vision and then having to try and find words for it all.

So why are we reflecting on this Scripture at the start of the Season of Creation? The words of praise that are offered at the end of the reading reveal the meaning of this scene to us:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”

That ‘for’ tells us the reason all this praise is going on. This worship is being offered because God, the Uncreated One, the Alpha and Omega, chose to make “all things.” It was God’s will to create, and by God’s power that all that is, seen and unseen, came into being. This universe is not an accident. God’s intention, God’s breath and God’s being hold it all in existence, and God’s eye-covered angels that see it all in every moment, outside time and space.

When we consider creation, as we’re doing across the coming month, our first reflections should not be about ourselves – our human place in it all, and how we relate to the earth, and what we have done to it, and how we might change those things. The only proper starting place to ponder creation is on the ground, with our crowns off, adoring the Maker of it all. All true prayer, all true worship begins with adoration. We forget ourselves, our projects, our choices, and our regrets for a moment, and open our hearts and minds to “wonder, love and praise.”

It's not especially common to offer adoration and devotion in our culture, have you noticed? We tend to want to be a bit ironic, a bit detached. We tend to be sceptical of anyone who desires praise. The worship of the elders and the four beasts in this scene from Revelation seems over the top to us, and if we’re honest, maybe a bit tedious. We can perhaps imagine ourselves quickly tiring of this kind of display and wanting to go and do something else.

Setting aside the fact that the imagery in the text is clearly not a literal video recording of heavenly praise, I think that what we may be missing when we look askance at this outpouring of constant worship is what it might be like to have a direct experience of the glory of God. We are so used to our normal disenchanted material existence, so used to living on this plane of reality, that we can barely imagine the kind of sheer confrontation with Divine beauty and intelligence and love that would give rise to this total loss of self-focus and upwelling of praise. All we can do is think of ourselves as we currently are, suddenly being required to spend all day, every day in in a kind of tent revival or megachurch concert. Which entirely misses the point that if we ever did get a glimpse of the uncreated light, adoration would be the only possible response. We wouldn't be able to help it and we wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

In our humanity, we go about our lives mostly wanting to keep our crowns on our heads – being prone to constant self-reflection, self-consciousness, self-regard. We work hard to keep our selves, our needs and interests at the centre of our world.

Thankfully, we have the tradition of the Church calling us to daily prayer, which always begins with praise and adoration of God. A habit of prayer asks us, in the midst of our lives, to look away from ourselves briefly toward God, toward that which can't be seen and can't be thought – only loved, only worshipped. When we do this, we take off the crown that makes us king or queen in our own royal pageant and we acknowledge that the very cells of our body and the hairs on our head depend on God for their existence, and are held in being by God's immortal power.

This Season of Creation, we are reminded once again that God is the source and sustainer of all that is beautiful and terrible, all that is sublime and wondrous, from the tiniest bug, the dew-covered spider's web through to canyons and crashing waves and to the things we can. Let's get in touch with our wonder, our delight, our awe...even our terror, or overwhelmedness. Whatever our busyness and distractedness, or our very legitimate reasons for being caught up in our own struggles, let's commit to taking time in each day to adore and give glory to the maker of all things – the one who is so far beyond our comprehending that all we can do is lift up our hearts in praise and thanksgiving.