

HEAVEN

(Revelation 5.1-14)

How would you describe colour to someone who was born blind? How would you teach a goldfish computer programming? How might anyone explain to my wife the football offside rule? And could a mere mortal ever contemplate the infinite splendour of heaven's perfections without being totally out of our depth?

We do get a bit of a glimpse of heaven though in Revelation 5.

Many Christians don't read Revelation, because it seems too advanced, too complicated or just too weird. That's understandable. But the basic message of Revelation, in five words, is this: In the end, Jesus wins.

The message of Revelation 5 in five words is this: "Jesus is in charge, having all heavenly authority, and holding the keys to history." Well, that's 14 words.

But Revelation 5, when we read it, leaves us with a lot of questions. Scrolls, seals, numbers, a lion of Judah, and a deformed lamb.

Let's see if we can break it down.

In v1 there's a scroll. It is written on the inside and outside, which means that it is complete. There is nothing else to say that isn't on this scroll. Unfortunately, it is sealed up with seven seals. Just as a week is incomplete without seven whole days, 7 is the number that represents perfection, totality.

So if a scroll is sealed with seven seals, that means it is completely inaccessible and totally impossible to open.

In actual fact, the contents are later revealed in chapters 6 and 7, and it's about the future of the world and God's plan throughout history. So this

sealed scroll, this closed book, contains the meaning of life, the universe and everything.

In v2, it says that no one is worthy to open the scroll and therefore no one is competent to explain the meaning of life or the purpose of existence. Verse 3 confirms this; absolutely no one is qualified for the job!

In v4 John says, "I wept and wept." What hope do people have if no one has the key to open the riddle of why we're here and where we're going?

If there is no divine purpose, everything is absurd.

Friedrich Nietzsche was a German atheist philosopher who wrote one of the most powerful pieces of literature ever written to show that life without God would be chaotic and violent.

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!" As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Emigrated? Thus they shouted and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Where is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him - you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving now? Where are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually, backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the

divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose you know. And God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."

Nietzsche, though he was a fanatical atheist and hated Christianity, wrote that to say that widespread abandonment of faith in Christ would lead to universal madness. He said that the 20th Century would be the bloodiest of all time - and he was right. Nietzsche foretold the century of Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, apartheid, the spread of terrorism, two World Wars, the atomic bomb and I could go on.

The very idea of a world where God is dead to us weighed heavily on Nietzsche's mind and he spent the last eleven years of his life locked away in an asylum, where he died in 1900. Without God, there's nothing left," said Nietzsche. No wonder John wept bitterly.

But in v5 we look up and see that all is not lost. Someone called the Lion of Judah has the authority to break the seals. It's a description of Jesus; one of the 250 different titles attributed to him, that's more than for anyone else in human history. He is from the Jewish tribe of Judah, strong as a lion.

But in v6 when John turns his head to look at this ferocious beast with teeth that can tear you apart, to his surprise, he sees a young lamb ... (apparently mortally wounded, though living).

A lamb with the strength of a lion. A lion with the meekness of a lamb. How like Jesus! We admire Jesus for his justice - but even more so because it is full of mercy. We praise him for his might and dominion - but even more so because he learned obedience to his parents. We love him because he confounded the great and the good with his wisdom - but even more so because he valued little children as most special of all.

John sees a lamb with seven horns (that means he has perfect strength) and seven eyes (that means he has perfect knowledge and wisdom).

Do not be confused by the seven spirits of God in v6; it is a reference to Isaiah 11.2 where the prophet speaks of the Spirit of the Lord, Spirit of

wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. There is only one Holy Spirit, whose perfections are endless, hence the number 7.

From v7 onwards, there are three songs; each one full of superlatives.

The first is sung by a small circle of elders and living creatures; they probably stand for God's people in all ages.

In v9 they sing a new song: "Yes, you are worthy to take the scroll and to break its seals for you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by your shed blood, people of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation. You made them a nation of kings and priests to serve our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

The second comes from the lips of countless angels.

In v12: they shout in a loud voice: He is worthy, the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and praise.

The third is thundered out by an even bigger choir; this is the song of all creation – trees, birds, land animals, underground creatures, fish and sea monsters – everything together!

Our galaxy measures a hundred thousand light-years in diameter. It is only one among a billion galaxies seen by our most powerful telescopes. In our Milky Way, there are about 100 billion stars, including our little sun that burns at 6,000°C at the surface, and rotates at a speed of 200 kilometres per second. All creation, the vast array of stars, all speak of our Creator's worth.

It's a picture of praise upon adoration upon worship.

In v13 All creatures in heaven and on earth and under the earth and the sea, all the beings that populate the universe, proclaim "To him who sits

on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power forever and ever."

Do you see the passion? Do you feel the emotion?

In May 1985 Eugene Ormandy was conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra. His energy and his love for the music were so great that he dislocated his shoulder as he put his heart, body and soul into waving his baton. That is as nothing compared to the passion of unfettered praise in heaven.

CS Lewis closed his Chronicles of Narnia with this vision of the age to come:

For us, this the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia-had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Heaven is where the meaning of life and the purpose of existence are perfectly clear. Heaven is where praise and worship never stop but never become dull. Heaven is where the mighty and strong Lion of Judah, the humble and gentle Lamb of God reigns. Heaven is unimaginable: "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no one has ever imagined what God has prepared for those who love him."

And heaven is where Jesus is now.