

Title: “Ready, steady – 2015 here we come!” (Part 1 of 2)

Purpose: To consider a first practical and functional resource to have ready for going into 2015.
To consider the BIBLICAL THEME of the Kingdom

INTRODUCTION

The setting was a party, probably just like some of the Christmas/New Year parties that we have been enjoying, and the conversation was between a solitary Christian and one of the other party goers.

Conversation had turned around to the subject of belief – and **coming under some pressure from the “majority opinion” in the room**, the Christian turned the question around on his critic:

“Q. So what’s your alternative? Go-on describe to me **your worldview.**”

“Q. **Worldview?** I haven’t got one!”

“Oh come on! You must have.

Every man, woman and child on this planet has a **worldview**. Everyone has something to say about life and its meaning.

Q. So what do you believe?”

“Well, I’m an atheist.”

“No, no – I’m ***not*** asking you what you **DON’T believe**. I’m asking you what you **DO believe!**”

It was only at this point, that the initially vocal critic, began to sound rather unsure of himself.

When I first read that “conversational exchange” in the Introduction to a book, a couple of thoughts hit me in this order:

- **FIRST** – what a good response when someone says “I’m an atheist” – it gives you a direct way in to say: “Ok – so I know someone of what you don’t believe. Q. What about what you actually **DO BELIEVE?**”
- **SECOND** – and really more importantly, it **prompts you to think about YOUR OWN BELIEF**.
Q. How certain am I about my own **WORLDVIEW?**

Live in very uncertain times

You know with 2015 just over the horizon, you do get a real sense that we live in very uncertain times (and I’m not suggesting that our times are unique in that) but just listening to the National and International News can be really pretty depressing, especially as a Christian. You are constantly wondering what will happen next:

- We have **epidemics** like **Ebola** ravaging many places in Africa.

And within the next generation, if we don’t find new antibiotics, we are going to be facing **drug-resistant superbugs** without anything with which to fight them.

- We have **virulent strains of Islam**, terrorizing and committing horrendous violent acts against large numbers of innocent people. A whole clutch of militant groups like: “Islamic State”, Al Shaabab, Boko Haram, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas – the list goes on.
- We have awoken to the reality that **banks are not always as strong as we think they are**. Only the other week, 3 of the UK’s banks failed the Bank of England “**economic doomsday**” stress tests.

Q. So could a day of financial meltdown one day hit us - maybe something much worse than the Global Financial Crisis of 2008?

- And just to add to that list – levels of anti-Christian sentiment are continually rising.

It used to be a case of what you might call: “**Post-Christian Sentiment**” – but really this has now very much hardened into “**Anti-Christian Sentiment**”.

Having an increasingly secular society means, in the same breath, having an increasingly TOLERANT society UNLESS you are talking about anyone wanting to maintain their Christianity in a PUBLIC and UNASHAMED manner.

This morning

This morning what I want to do is to try and answer the question:

Q. What do we centrally hold onto in our Christian (Biblical) Worldview?

And

Q. How does this resource us to face 2015 – whatever that might bring?

A thematic message

- If you have been at this church for any length of time you will know that most of the time we are preaching our way through some book of the bible in a systematic way – what is usually called **EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING**.
- On a few occasions I will just restrict myself to one key verse and preach on that – this is typically known as **TEXTUAL PREACHING**.
- Today we are not going to do either of these – instead I want to do what would qualify as **THEMATIC PREACHING** where we try and preach about a theme.

Q. So what then is our THEME?

Well it is the theme of “**THE KINGDOM**”.

Daniel chapter 2 – A starting point

I want to turn first-off to Daniel chapter 2 and the dream which Nebuchadnezzar had, which greatly troubled him.

Daniel, having prayed to the LORD, had BOTH the dream itself and also its interpretation revealed to him.

This is **Daniel 2 Verses 31-35**: “You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay.

While you were watching, **a rock was cut out, but not by human hands**. It **struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them**. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace.

But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.”

The explanation of this strange dream follows a couple of verses further on:

Verse 37-44 “You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. **You are that head of gold**.

After you, another kingdom will rise, **inferior** to yours. **Next, a third kingdom**, one of **bronze**, will rule over the whole earth. **Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom**, strong as **iron**—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay. As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.

In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.”

Let me roll the clock 400 years on from when Daniel, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was penning these prophetic Scriptures.

It was a very significant moment that has gone down in history as **“The Day of Eleusis”**:

AD 168 – The Decline of the Greek Empire (The Day of Eleusis)

The year was **AD 168**. The **Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes IV** was en-route with his army to try and finally defeat the **Egyptians**, who had retreated back to **Alexandria**.

Well, the Egyptians appealed to the Senate in Rome for help and they, promptly despatched a **Proconsul** by the name of **Popilius Laenas**.

Now, **Antiochus Epiphanes IV** was a very tyrannical ruler and he had caused much havoc with the Jews and had desecrated the temple in Jerusalem.

But on this particular day in question, the Roman Senator **Popilius** caught up with **Antiochus** in a place called **Eleusis** (just in the suburbs of **Alexandria**), and faced him down.

He offered the king an ultimatum from the Senate **that he must “evacuate Egypt immediately”**.

Antiochus begged to have time to consider but **Popilius** “drew a circle round him in the sand with his cane and told him to decide before he stepped outside it”. **Antiochus chose to obey the Roman ultimatum and quietly went home.**

Historically this is where the Daniel’s **Bronze** part of the statue was giving way to the season of the strong yet brittle **Iron** part, the mighty Roman Empire taking over supremacy from the Greek empire.

History does have a shape

It is very clear that HISTORY has movement – things are always changing. One thing is coming in and another is going out.

BUT – that said, not all cultures or worldviews consider HISTORY to carry any weight. For example:

- **in some Eastern faiths**, they believe that things just go around in a circle.

Hence, for them, HISTORY is really not very significant when seen in that light.

- **EVEN in Western materialistic and individualistic thinking**, HISTORY can somewhat lose its meaning.

Life can very easily take on a very mechanical appearance:

WAKE UP – WASH – EAT – WORK – EAT – WORK – EAT – WATCH TV – SLEEP and then back around the same cycle for approximately 40 working years.

But Scripture is at pains to let us know that: **HISTORY IS GOING SOMEWHERE.**

Alexander the Great

Now having said that the Greek empire was being overwhelmed and overtaken by the up and coming Roman Empire, I am not suggesting that **Alexander the Great** had been a particular weak leader.

Listen to his words to his soldiers at Opis in Mesopotamia:

“... I have no part of my body, in front at least, that is left without scars. There is no weapon, used at close quarters, or hurled from a far, of which I do not carry the mark. I have been wounded by the sword, shot with arrows, struck from a catapult, smitten many times with stones and clubs for you, for your glory, for your wealth.”

So I think, like various other leaders after him (**Herod the Great** granted the title “King of the Jews” by the Romans OR maybe **Peter the Great** – Emperor of all Russia in the 1600’s), he is, no doubt, worthy of the suffix – “The Great”.

HOWEVER – the problem is they simply do not last. Sooner or later they die or simply begin to fade and get overtaken by someone greater and stronger.

And so through all of history there is a longing and an ongoing search for one who would rise above the title of “The Great” to the title of “The Only”.

Revelation Chapter 5

This quest comes to a head in Chapter 5 of Revelation where we come to what appears to be **one of the saddest cries:**

Revelation 5 verses 1-4 “Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. **I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.**

So then, we have the aged evangelist and apostle John weeping at the apparent inability of the cosmos to produce anyone adequate to be inspirer for the human race.

As the chapter unfolds, one of the 24 elders comes to comfort him and correct his short-sightedness:

Revelation 5 verses 5-6 “Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.”

John in his gospel describes Jesus with that unique title:

(John 1 verse 14) “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of **the One and Only**, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

(John 1 verse 18) “No one has ever seen God, but God **the One and Only**, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”

Jesus alone is a King who has the suffix beyond “The Great”, instead He is “Jesus the One and Only” and his Kingdom is therefore unlike any other.

This is precisely why Daniel, in the power of the Spirit, wrote about this stone “not cut out by human hands”:

(Daniel 2 verse 44) “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.”

The Christian faith was always very radical

I think it is important for us to realise that the Christian faith or worldview, has always, even from the very outset been very radical in its message.

Let me just take you back to around the year 50AD when Paul was on his 3rd missionary journey and was causing upset wherever he went.

Acts 17 verses 5-6 “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, **saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.**”

When Paul got to that very learned place of Athens and was preaching there to many skeptics on Mars Hill, he was right in sight of the great Parthenon, that huge temple of the virgin Goddess Athena that was perched on the top of

the Acropolis.

No doubt many of the skeptics would simply have looked upon Paul from this temple and thought him just mad and very sadly misguided.

Well by the year AD 435 that same Parthenon was designated a Christian church and remained that way for a 1,000 years.

We need to realise that Christianity has and will stand the test of time.

Despite the fact that many people have doubted the authentic history of the four gospels – it is a reality today that people tend to call their kids: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John after the gospel writers - **BUT THEIR DOGS they tend to call CAESAR!!**

The THEME/CONCEPT of the Kingdom

We have a King like no other and that means we also have a kingdom that is unlike any other – and that is not only true of its DURABILITY – the fact that it will never pass away.

Matthew’s gospel has the Kingdom of God as a theme (or if I want to be more accurate, he prefers to use the synonymous term “Kingdom of Heaven” which was somewhat more suited to the primarily Jewish audience that he was writing for.)

And we soon discover that the THEME of the KINGDOM provides us something multi-faceted.

If you were hoping for one single comprehensive definition of the KINGDOM, then you are going to be sadly disappointed.

HOWEVER – in some ways that works to our advantage in as much as there is not just one way in which we will suddenly say – “Look there it is THE KINGDOM” – rather there will be many occasions and different contexts in which you will say to yourself – “There you are – it’s the KINGDOM again.”

Matthew 13

Let me demonstrate what I mean by way of a section of teaching in Matthew’s gospel which will be familiar to quite a few of you, simply because it comes by way of the parables where Jesus again and again says::

- Now the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN is like...**someone sowing seed**:

You will find that people respond in a whole variety of ways, ranging from no response at all, to wildly enthusiastic (but shallow), to deeply receptive but nonetheless choked out by prior worldly interests – to those who will truly take the KINGDOM MESSAGE on board

- Now the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN is like...**good seeds growing right alongside bad weeds**:

When you see look-a-likes, when you have sound-a-likes, right in the church pew next to yours – say to yourself, THIS IS A TRUE SIGN OF THE KINGDOM OF JESUS.

- Now the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN is like...**a tinsy-winsy mustard seed that grew into a huge tree:**

So many times, we feel that it is almost a rare thing to come across another person who truly loves and longs and suffers and serves the King of Kings – Jesus the One and Only.

But we should just say – this is exactly like the KINGDOM!!

- Now the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN is like...**a small amount of bread yeast that worked its way right through the whole batch of dough:**

When you think of the various world religions, so many are centred and have always been centred in certain places (in the main), however Christianity has moved around, at different times on different continents Christianity has flourished.

This KINGDOM slowly gets to every corner of this large world.

- Now the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN is like...**a field with treasure in it OR a pearl of immense value, that a man blew everything he had just to get it:**

When you see someone paying the ultimate price – then you should say this is THE KINGDOM.

Many people converting from Islam to Christianity in the UK are paying a very high price to have **this treasure** to own **this pearl of great price** – and in this we are made aware of THE KINGDOM.

Not the circumference but the centre

With all the emphasis that the 4 gospels give to the THEME of the KINGDOM – it seems initially curious that the various NT letters have relatively little to say on the subject.

Q. So why might this be?

Q. Paul trying to dilute down Jesus’ teaching? Well NO!

I think the answer comes down to the fact that what is important is not so much defining the PERIMETER or the CIRCUMFERENCE of the KINGDOM but instead seeing who and what is at the CENTRE of the KINGDOM.

As Richard Bewes puts it:

“To come to know Christ, to grow in likeness to him, to walk in his Spirit, to make him the Lord of our lives is to have become members of the kingdom.”

The reality is that the blessings of the KINGDOM and the blessings of SALVATION are one and the same. So for example:

- in Mark 10 – 3 times Jesus explains how hard it is for people “to enter the Kingdom of Heaven”. Then the disciples look at each other and say “Who then can be saved?”

- In Luke 21 – Jesus speaking of the various signs of the end times says that “the kingdom of God is near”. In reference to those same signs Jesus indicates to his disciples that they can hold their heads up high because “your redemption is drawing near.”

CONCLUSION

I want to try and tie up loose ends and polish off what we have been saying in regard to our **THEME of THE KINGDOM**, this great **FUNCTIONAL RESOURCE** that Scripture concentrates on and gives to us.

Domitian and the book of Revelation

In AD 51 Titus Flavius Domitian was born and he was to become the most powerful man in the world of that day.

The Imperial Roman Eagle was to be found in authority in many a country far and wide and the Mediterranean needed no warships patrolling given that it was nothing less than a vast Roman Lake!

However by AD 90 Domitian’s behaviour had become so outrageous that plots were hatched which would finally see his assassination in AD 96 – however just prior to this the Book of Revelation was written to re-assure Christians who knew that they were living on a knife-edge – only ever a step away from a one way ticket to the Colosseum to face the lions.

To read the book of Revelation is become aware again and again of a **THRONE** (it comes over 40 times). And if you want to just get into the **VICTORIOUS** spirit of the book just read:

Revelation 7 verses 9&10 “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the **throne** and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

You see in just the same way that Daniel and his 3 friends survived the Babylonian tyranny through the vision of the stone that became a mountain, so also did the persecuted believers in Domitian’s day triumph against all the odds because of their grasp of the victory of God in Jesus Christ.

Kingdom vision

You see a proper **“KINGDOM VISION”** is one that both makes sense of the present and also **resources you** for the future:

CS Lewis put it like this:

“Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in as well. Aim at earth, and you will get neither.”

Revelation 21

The last but one chapter of the Bible – Revelation 21 – puts in the final jigsaw pieces for us – **it makes sense, KINGDOM SENSE of things:**

- **1. It makes sense of our present turbulent world** – the opening verse there states that (Verse 1) “...that there was no longer any sea.” (Sea there is a symbol for all the instability and struggle of godless nations.
- **2. It makes sense of the church’s present frustrations** – Verse 3 reads: “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”

Yes the wait will be over – the bridegroom will arrive to take his bride home.

- **3. It makes sense of the problem of pain** – Verse 4 says that “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain...” Truly a thing of the past.
- **4. It makes sense of our very tangled history** – Verse 5 says that there is going to be a new order, one that is completely remade. Verse 6 uses that confident PROPHETIC PAST when it says “It is done!”. The rule of the ONE AND ONLY is finally and fully consummated.
- **5. It makes sense of our unfulfilled hopes** – which one of us does not long for significance. And maybe the things we long for in this life might not be fulfilled, YET what will come will satisfy at a much deeper level. Verses 6&7 says: “To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this,...”

Hopefully now we are better placed to answer our opening questions:

Q. What do we CENTRALLY HOLD ONTO in our Christian Worldview?

Q. How does this RESOURCE US to face 2015 – whatever that might bring?

Moses in his death speech, a whole Millennia before Daniel, showed that he knew the same key truth when he said about all the alien cultures & rival philosophies that surrounded them at the time:

(Deuteronomy 32 Verse 31) “For their rock is not like our Rock, as even our enemies concede...”

I’ll let Daniel provide us the final word:

Daniel 2 verses 34-35 “While you were watching, **a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them.** Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace.

But the rock that struck the statue BECAME A HUGE MOUNTAIN AND FILLED THE WHOLE EARTH.”

AMEN