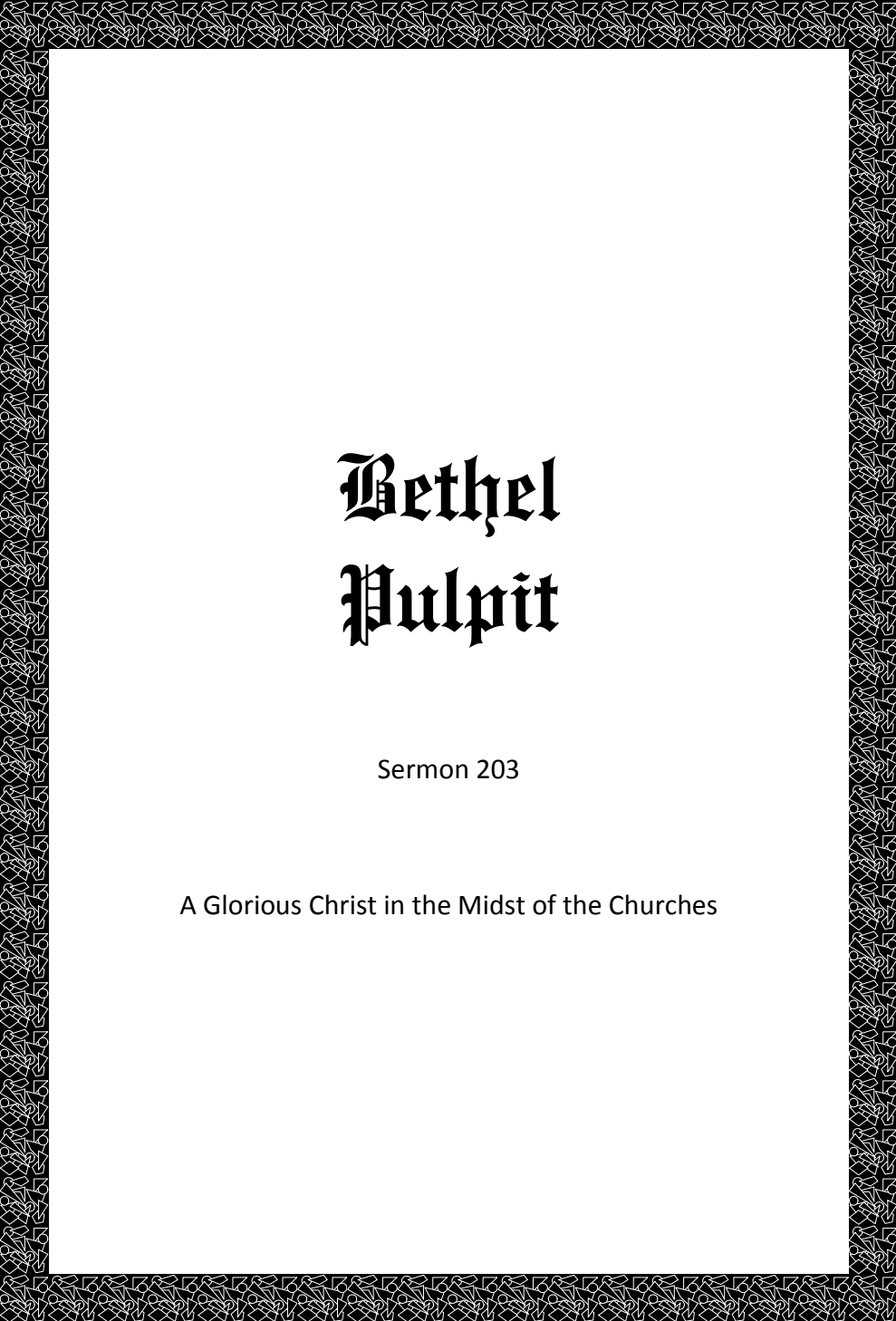




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 203

A Glorious Christ in the Midst of the Churches

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 24th March, 2002**

Text: *“And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks One like unto the Son of man” (Revelation 1. 12, 13).*

John was now a most aged man, the last of the disciples still to be alive. Judas had gone to his own place. All the other disciples had sealed their testimony with their blood with a martyr's death, and John is still left alive. It must have been over sixty years since the Lord Jesus had died and rose again. What changes John had known! He had been an eminent preacher of the gospel, but now it seems there was this dark, awful cloud over his last days. For the testimony of Jesus Christ he had been exiled. He was on the rocky island of Patmos. Tradition tells us that though such an aged man, he had to work in the mines there. For a time he had been the pastor of the church at Ephesus. He was separated from his loved congregation. Here he was all alone, no Christian fellowship, no Christian friends, an aged man. O the mystery of divine sovereignty, the mystery of divine providence! Why should the beloved disciple have to undergo such things? Why in his latter days should all these things come upon him?

Beloved friends, none of us know what lies before us. None of us know where our last days will be spent. I am sure many of you here tonight have things in your life, you never thought of them, you never anticipated them, you never dreamt of them. Yet they came. Some of you aged ones, perhaps especially you in the Bethesda Home, you never thought when you were young that your last days would be spent living in Harpenden. O but the mystery of divine providence, the mystery of divine sovereignty!

Now it was the Lord's day, and John was there all alone in his isolation, separated from friends and loved ones on that rocky island. But beloved friends, he never had a better day in all his life. I do not know with some of you, but perhaps you look back to your spiritual beginnings and your former days and, “Oh that I were as in months past!”

“What peaceful hours I then enjoyed,
How sweet their memory still!

But now I find an aching void
The world can never fill.”

Some of us set out well in our spiritual pilgrimage with a soft heart, a heart aflame with the love of Christ. We never thought that in later years we would be as dull and dark and dead and unprofitable as we are. We look back to those first beginnings, those happy days, those blessed memories; and no doubt John did. He must often have thought of when he was a young disciple, the youngest of the disciples, when he was so favoured by the Lord Jesus. But the Lord can still give you the best day, the greatest blessing you have ever had. And if He sees fit not to do so, well the best is still to come, the best is before you. You will soon be singing the everlasting song, “Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood ... to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.” The point is this: the Lord Jesus had not forgotten John, and the Lord Jesus has not forgotten you. “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands; thy walls are continually before Me.”

So John wakes up, and he realises it is the Lord’s day. He cannot come to the house of God. He cannot meet with the Lord’s people. Yet he says, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.” It is a wonderful thing to be in the Spirit on the Lord’s day. John had no chapel to attend, but he was in the Spirit. We do have a chapel to attend, but we are not always in the Spirit. When you wake up on the Lord’s day morning, are you always in the Spirit? One thing is clear, we cannot put ourselves in the Spirit. Another thing is clear: the only way in which we can be found in the Spirit on the Lord’s day is if the Lord Himself puts us in the Spirit. But these are wonderful seasons when we are “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day,” when we welcome it, the sweet day of rest, the day of the resurrection. With holy anticipation we go to the house of God with a desire by faith to see the Saviour’s face, with a desire by faith to see the King in His beauty.

“I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.” John could not understand why he was in exile, why he had to suffer these things, this loneliness, this isolation. John did not know, but the Lord did, and you and I do now. Why, he had to have this wonderful revelation of Christ and he had to write it down that you and I might have it in this solemn, latter day. That is why he was on the Isle of Patmos. That is why Paul was in prison at

Rome, that those blessed epistles might go through the churches. That is why Bunyan was in prison in Bedford, that the *Pilgrim's Progress* might be written. And your trial, your affliction, your mysterious providence, the Lord has a purpose for you. The things that have happened unto you are "fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel." John had this wonderful revelation to write. Our worthy translators entitled it, "The revelation of St. John the divine." The Holy Ghost entitled it, "The revelation of Jesus Christ."

"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day." And he heard this voice. Really, he was aroused. He turned to see this voice that was speaking, and being turned he saw (this was a vision, of course) he "saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks One like unto the Son of man." Let us be clear, he viewed the exalted Saviour in all His glory. It was many, many years since he was a young man standing amid the crowd on the banks of the River Jordan. That was a long time ago, and the other John was preaching, and a glorious Stranger appears in the crowd and John the Baptist cries, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." This John as a young man looks and for the first time sees the Saviour and he leaves all and follows Him. That was many years ago, and now he sees Him again. Let us be clear, he recognised Him. He knew who He was, this One like unto the Son of man. He knew that He was his dear Lord and Saviour. But he views Him now in all His eternal glory, and he is prostrated before it. Just like Isaiah, that vision he had when he saw the Lord high and lifted up. He was prostrated before it. The church of God would be different, you and I would be different, if we had – not some vision, not some dream – but if by faith we had a glimpse of a glorious, almighty, exalted Saviour.

Now if ever anyone according to the flesh knew the Lord Jesus, it was John. He leaned on Jesus' breast. He had that privileged position. But now he says, "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead." O this view of the Lord Jesus in all His risen, ascended glory, King of kings, Lord of lords. He says, "I fell at His feet as dead." But it was this same Jesus, now glorified, but this same Jesus, the same in His love, the same in His tenderness, the same in His compassion. "He laid His right hand upon me" – the right hand of authority, the right hand of grace. "He laid His right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the First and the Last: I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen;

and have the keys of hell and of death.” Now what a sight of love, mercy and grace, there sweetly, solemnly mingled with majesty and with glory.

“I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks One like unto the Son of man.” O this view of the exalted Saviour in all His glory and beauty and suitability! He was “clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle” – His people’s Prophet, Priest and King. “His head and His hairs were white like wool, as white as snow.” John beheld Him as the Ancient of Days, He who is from everlasting to everlasting. Now in the Song of Solomon, where there is a similar description, we read of the heavenly Bridegroom there that “His locks are bushy, and black as a raven.” Now that is Christ in all the glory of His eternal youth, but this is Christ as the Ancient of Days, from everlasting to everlasting. “His head and His hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and His eyes were as a flame of fire” – those all-seeing eyes, those eyes that penetrate, those eyes that behold the evil and the good, in the sinner’s heart, in the churches, those eyes before which we tremble and yet those eyes that discern the feeblest mark of grace, the feeblest desire, the feeblest longing after Christ. “His eyes were as a flame of fire; and His feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace.” And well they may, because in Gethsemane and at Calvary those sacred feet did burn in a furnace as they were nailed to the cross and as they trod the winepress of the wrath of God. They did burn in a furnace, and it is those feet which will trample down every enemy of the church of God. “His feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and His voice as the sound of many waters.” That voice of divine authority, that voice which at Calvary cried, “It is finished”; that voice which speaks to a poor, vile, polluted sinner, “Thou art all fair, My love; there is no spot in thee.” O that voice of authority! “His voice as the sound of many waters. And He had in His right hand seven stars: and out of His mouth went a sharp twoedged sword” – a sword to destroy every enemy, to destroy all who oppose Him, all who oppose His church, all who oppose His people. “And His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.” “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” “See where it shines in Jesus’ face.” “His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.” Now John in this vision has this wonderful

revelation of this glorious Christ, whom he had known and loved on earth, whom he had seen crucified, but now risen, exalted, ascended, glorified.

“And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks One like unto the Son of man.” Now they say seven is a number of perfection. John really saw two things. He saw this glorious Christ held seven stars in His right hand, and he also saw that He was walking amidst seven golden candlesticks. We are told clearly what the mystery means, that the seven stars are the angels, or ministers, or pastors of the seven churches. What an unspeakable mercy that gospel ministers are in the hands of Christ! I know all God’s people are. “Yea, He loved the people; all His saints are in Thy hand.” But gospel ministers in a special way are in the hands of Christ. In His hand were seven stars, and, “the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.” I just venture one thought on why true gospel ministers are spoken of as stars, and it is this: I believe that if there is any man sent of God to preach, then he will in his preaching throw light upon the Word of God. The seven stars. The stars shine on a dark night. The stars give light in darkness. And the office of the gospel minister in his preaching is to shine light on the Holy Scriptures. Now it is a solemn thing if a man stands up to preach and, “Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?” I think you will find this. You hear a man preach for the first time and perhaps you wonder what to expect. Let us be clear, there are no two alike. Different people have different abilities. But if he is one of the stars in Christ’s right hand, I believe in his ministry, in preaching the Word of God’s grace, there will be that heavenly light which will shine upon the Word as he seeks to set it forth. “And He had in His right hand seven stars.”

“The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in My right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.” There were these candlesticks, seven of them, and they were made of gold, and these were the seven churches of Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Of course, this revelation is given to the whole church of God in all ages. Just a word in passing. The seven different candlesticks and the seven separate letters to seven churches, addressed each one to the pastor of each church – this very strongly implies the independent order of the churches. Many of the very old trust deeds conclude something like this: “and the

independent order of the churches inviolate,” no power on earth having the right to interfere. But just a thought on why the churches are called golden candlesticks. Well, they are precious in God’s sight, golden candlesticks. And a candlesticks exists for one thing. There is a candle which burns, a candle which gives light, and if a church is not burning, and if a church is not giving light, then we shall read of that terrible thing, the removing of the candlestick. Now how often solemnly have we seen this in our little lifetimes: one candlestick after another candlestick removed.

Now I think I am right in this, that if ever the Lord removes a candlestick in any place, that candlestick is never replaced. A chapel can get very low and be restored, but when a chapel departs from the truth, it is the removing of the candlestick for ever. But these shining, burning candlesticks. The Holy Ghost’s testimony of John the Baptist is that “he was a burning and a shining light” – in that order. I want to speak graciously, but there are a lot of people on every hand and they want to be shining lights, but they do not want to be burning lights. Now John was a burning light. He burned with zeal for the Lord’s honour and glory. He burned with love to Christ, and he burned himself out, and that is why he was such a burning, shining light. There are multitudes who want to be shining lights, but may the Lord in love and mercy make us burning lights, and may we as a church be a golden candlestick, a burning and a shining light.

“And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks One like unto the Son of man.” Now that is a very precious point, and it is a vital point, that Christ walks among the candlesticks, that Christ walks among the churches. Do you believe it? There is a very solemn sense to it, because in chapters 2 and 3 as He walks among the candlesticks, He sends a message to every one of the seven churches. “I know thy works.” He has these eyes as a flame of fire and He walks among the candlesticks. That is the solemnity of it. Yet there is the blessedness of it – His gracious presence. “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I.” It does not matter if it is only two or three, but it does matter that they are gathered together, and it does matter that it is in the name of Jesus. “There am I” – Christ in the midst. May there be many occasions with us when we meet together on the Lord’s day that we too are found in the Spirit, and we too like favoured John view the risen Saviour walking among the candlesticks. It is a good prayer, “Jesus, stand amongst us, in Thy risen power.” As on the day of

the resurrection, the doors were shut and Jesus Himself stood in the midst. Now we do not want anything less than that, Jesus Himself standing in the midst, walking in the midst of the golden candlesticks, saying, “Peace be unto you,” saying, “Fear not ... I am He that liveth, and was dead,” showing His wounded hands and feet and side, blessing us with His peace.

“And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks One like unto the Son of man.” Well then, the effect of it. What did it mean to John? What did it mean to the churches then? What does it mean to you and me today? Well, first of all John, as he was a sinner, a needy sinner, though an apostle, it meant everything to him, and it will to you, and it will to me, because our great need is Christ. Our great need is a Saviour. Unworthy, sinful, lost, ruined, weak, helpless – O but a glimpse of Christ by faith in all His glory, in all His suitability, in all His fulness of grace, in all His power to save even to the uttermost, that will do everything for us. We will not need anything else, because this was an Almighty Saviour that John viewed. And may you and I by faith have just a glimpse of this risen, exalted Saviour, able even to save to the uttermost. May that be the reason why we come to chapel. May that be the reason why we want to be found in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, to see the King in His beauty.

“And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks One like unto the Son of man.” But another thing, John in all his tribulation speaks of himself as a “companion in tribulation.” O this view of Christ, it meant everything! It killed him to the world. It lifted him above inferior things. For a time he forgot his sorrows. But he realised this: that this glorious Christ loved him even in his affliction, that this glorious Christ was with him even in his tribulation, and that this glorious Christ was on the throne, almighty, in control – not Satan, not the cruel Roman emperor who had sentenced him here, not those who were holding him in captivity on the Island of Patmos. This glorious Christ was in control of John’s life. “All must come, and last, and end, as shall please my heavenly Friend.”

“And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks One like unto the Son of man.” But what did this mean to the churches to whom John had to write? We understand this was about the year 96, when there was the most cruel, appalling persecution of the people of God by the Emperor Domitian. The churches

were in great need, in great sorrow, in great tribulation. There is going to be this wonderful revelation that follows, but right at the beginning, this view of the glories of Christ. Now beloved friends, I hope you can follow me here. I do not want you to think of chapter 1 in the Book of the Revelation as being separate from the whole of this great but mysterious Book. Chapter 1 is not just like one of those publishers' introductions where the author writes a little preface but it is not really important. It is not like that. If it is a right expression to use, this glorious vision of the exalted Son of man that the Apostle John had casts its blessed shadow over every page of the following chapters till the canon of Scripture is ended.

What is going to be the subject matter of the Book of the Revelation? It is mysterious; it is in figurative language; it is in strange imagery. But the whole theme is the conflict between good and evil, between Christ and the devil, between Almighty God and Satan. This terrible conflict. And the whole point is this: it is Christ who is going to have dominion, not Satan, not the world, not sin. It is Christ who is going to triumph. And so His beloved church is going to triumph. That is why these things have to be written to the seven churches. So in chapter 1 there is this glorious shadow. Is there going to be a conflict between Christ and Satan? Then before anything begins to be said, there is this view that John has of who Christ is, this glorious, exalted Saviour, a real Man but true Almighty God, and having all power in heaven and earth, with all authority. This vision is vital to the whole Book. That is why the cause of God is going to be triumphant. That is why God's people are going to triumph, not the world, not their enemies, not sin, not Satan. O how vital this chapter 1 is, how vital this view of Christ is to the whole of what follows! What a comfort it must have been to the suffering church of God at the end of the first century to know that they had a God and a Saviour who had conquered once, who was now in heaven, who was almighty, this glorious Man on the white horse with a crown on His head and a bow in His hand who goes forth conquering and to conquer (Rev. 6. 2)!

“And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks One like unto the Son of man.” This wonderful vision, this view of Christ exalted, Christ almighty. First, what it meant to John as a sinner; second, what it meant to John in all his fears and tribulation and sorrow; third, what it meant to the suffering church of God then; and finally, what it means to us today, because this conflict between good and evil, between Christ and Satan, is perhaps more fierce

than ever, more fierce than it was even when John wrote, when John had this vision. We do not know what we will hear next. We do not know what we will read tomorrow. Sometimes it almost seems as if the powers of hell are let loose, and sometimes it almost seems as if the powers of hell will triumph. But this is the answer. It is in a Person, a glorious Man, a Man at God's right hand, a Man who is also true Almighty God, a Man who is on the throne, who is in control, and He must reign until He hath put every enemy beneath His feet. O the cause of God is a victorious cause. Your cause is a victorious cause. The cause of the church of God is a victorious cause. The gates of hell shall never prevail against it. "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony."

"And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks One like unto the Son of man." Well then, beloved friends, may you and I have just a glimpse. May you and I tonight by faith "behold the glories of the Lamb, amidst His Father's throne." And then that will put everything right, everything.