

Casting Down our Crowns

“They lay their crowns before the throne” – Revelation 4:10

1. It feels appropriate, on this Wesley Day, to refer to a classic but often overlooked work of John Wesley, his *Primitive Physik*, first published in 1747. It's essentially a handbook of health, compiled from Wesley's careful observation and study over many years, and is filled with a range of remedies for an array of ailments, ranging from wholesome and common-sense advice, to some rather strange (and potentially dangerous) treatments. One of my favourites, a cure for baldness, reads thus: *rub the part, morning and evening, with onions, until it is red* – presumably the head rather than the onion – *and rub it afterwards with honey*. Alternatively, says Wesley, referring to new medical technology that he used and promoted avidly, *electrify it daily!*

2. Reading our passage from Revelation today, one wonders whether perhaps John, the author, had been attempting to cure some baldness with John Wesley's alternative electrical therapy! Certainly, Revelation 4 is a fantastic vision. Too much electrification may well lead to visions of emerald thrones spewing out rainbows and dancing creatures, covered with eyes, front and back! Of course, stepping back from the brink of humour to the more solid ground of biblical exegesis, we note that the vision of Revelation is indeed *energised* – not, though, by electricity, but by personal divine impulse – by the Spirit of Jesus (see 1:10). In the Spirit, John sees God's throne room coming into focus, in what we call an *apocalypse*, a word which here means a fantastic revelation, showing things as they really are, as God sees them and as God intends one day that we will all see them.

3. This apocalypse, inspired not by electricity but by Jesus' energetic Spirit, fills John's field of vision. He's not now on the island of Patmos, as he said in 1:9 – he's at the beating heart of the universe, the throne room of God. We don't meet the central character, except in passing, until the next chapter, when we will encounter the paradoxical figure of the Lion who is the Lamb. Here, all we're told is that the person on the throne looks like jasper and ruby. For now, John – and us – and the other occupants of the heavenly throneroom are caught up in the energy that surrounds the throne. There's a divine momentum which is constantly flowing outwards, described here as the rainbow of covenant faithfulness. There's also a constant movement inwards, as first four living creatures with eyes front and back and 6 wings each turn to praise the one on the throne, and then 24 elders around them, dance off their own thrones and sing and take their crowns off their heads and cast them towards the divine majesty at the centre of it all. As John Wesley said, in his notes on this passage: 'The court of heaven is here laid open; and the throne of God is, as it were, the centre from which everything in the visible world goes forth, and to which everything returns.' Who says worship is boring?!

4. Now, just a moment though. Did you notice those details? The 24 elders sat on 24 other thrones, around the central throne. And when the living creatures praised God, those 24 elders got off their thrones and fell down before God's throne, and cast their crowns before him. I don't know about you, but it suddenly struck me as a little odd that there are other crowns and other thrones in this vision. Here we are, in the throne room of God, and there is not one throne but 25! Worship, surely, is about the incomparability of God – so surely there should only be one throne and one crown. But that is not the vision here. And, I'd like to suggest today, this simple image, of crowned elders repeatedly falling down from *their* thrones and casting *their* crowns towards the central royal throne gives us an apocalyptic picture of worship – a revelation of what's really going on – in greater, deeper, higher definition. It's a vision of worship – and indeed of discipleship – that we can profitably consider today, sending us, I believe, into that deeper scriptural holiness, that happy and holy communion, which was at the heart of the Wesleyan encounter with God.

5. To explore this, I'm going to use a technique used by John Wesley in many of his sermons, and ask three questions, which we will answer in turn:

- I. Why are there other crowns and thrones?
- II. What is the significance of the elders who fall down from their thrones?
- III. What is involved in casting down crowns before God's throne?

1.1. First, why are there other crowns and thrones in John's vision? Simply, because there are other crowns and other thrones in the universe, besides God's.

1.2. The concept is classically Jewish. The Hebrew Scriptures were unafraid to name a pantheon of deities, from Marduk of the Babylonians to Baal of the Canaanites to even the household idols of the patriarchs! The Decalogue, the ten commandments, arguably the codified centre of Jewish religion, includes the prominent command 'You shall have no other god beside me.' Note, the command is not, 'there are no other gods', but 'you shall have no other gods'. There is no point pretending that God's is the only kingdom on the block, that there is only one throne in the universe...of course there are others – other kingdoms, other thrones, other gods – and these others have a powerful pull on human devotion.

1.3. It is therefore not simply an empty statement that Yahweh, the name of the God of the Hebrews, is announced time after time as 'the King of kings and Lord of lords.' Worship of Israel's God was never offered in a vacuum...indeed, the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures can, and has, been seen as Israel's testimony that upholds their claim that all other gods are unseeing, unhearing blocks of wood in comparison to the living, active, arm-outstretched-to-embrace-the-world God of Israel. Time and again we read, we hear, 'The gods of the nations are idols, but Yahweh made the heavens!' Again, note, the biblical witness is not, 'there are no other gods', but 'these other gods are impotent blocks of wood and stone in comparison to God who creates the universe!' Take a gander through the Bible, and keep your eyes and ears open, and you'll see thrones and crowns everywhere!

1.4. So, we delude ourselves if we imagine for a moment that our worship of God today is offered in any less of a crowded space. Our gods may not be named for fertility and sexual prowess, and pleasure, and plenty, and military might, and good health like those of the ancient empires...but then again, maybe they are! Recognising that there are other crowns and other thrones is simply a part of truth-telling. Indeed, perhaps the question for us is not, 'are there other crowns and thrones besides God's?', but rather, 'is there anything in our lives which is *not* a crown or a throne'.

1.5. Crowns denote ruling authority. Thrones are seats of power. Thrones and crowns are what control our lives, what dominate our decisions, what keep us alert and attentive, *what we live and die for*. There are other thrones and crowns in the Bible, and in John's vision here in Revelation, because, if we are to tell the truth about life, and about our life of worship, there is never only God's throne for us. We enthrone health and wealth, fulfilment and fruitfulness, independence and autonomy, ourselves, our family, our friends, our communities, our pets, our environment, our past, our future, our minds, our emotions, our bodies... The vision of God's throne, appropriately, then, is not a solitary throne – it is in the midst of others, in the midst of our life.

2.1. Secondly, then, what is the significance of the elders who fall down from their thrones in John's vision? Now, in answering this question, I'm not going to try to persuade you of any of the major ways that the imagery of Revelation is interpreted by the commentators. You can figure that out for yourselves. Instead, I simply want to think about the fact that here in heaven are humans with crowns.

2.2. Psalm 8, which begins by declaring the splendour of God, continues by asking what human beings are, in the eyes of this splendiferous God, who has made the infinite universe. The answer comes in verse 5: *you, God, have made humans a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honour*. God has crowned us, human beings, with a measure of his own splendour! It is integral to the Christian understanding of humanity that we are created in the image of God,

tasked by God to share in the stewardship of creation, crowned with a measure of God's own authority, that we might co-reign, co-rule, in the words of Genesis, 'have dominion' in creation, responsible for the welfare and wellbeing of the work of God.

2.3. So these elders in Revelation 4, with their thrones and their crowns, remind me that *God has crowned us* – that it is part of our peculiar dignity as human beings that we exercise freedom and responsibility; that, if you like, *we rule* in our own kingdoms and queendoms. That this is so, reminds us that God is not miserly, but generous with the life with which he blesses us. Human dignity is not prised out of God's clasped fist, but flows freely and willingly from open nail-pierced palms. God crowns us! We are not compelled to worship God, arm-twisted into faith, coerced into Christianity. And if you feel you have been, then let me tell you that's not the good news of Jesus Christ that you've encountered. The elders in Revelation offer authentically human worship – their dancing and singing and crown laying is not robotic programming, but the free and willing – and glad! – exercise of proper human dignity and authority. In response to the generosity of God, and the glorious song of the four living creatures around the throne, the elders choose to fall down and lay down their crowns.

3.1. Which lead us, finally, to ask, What is involved in casting down our crowns before God's throne? We have noted the crowded marketplace of thrones; we have noted the dignity God has crowned us with; now, we turn to the question our lives must answer: in the marketplace of thrones, where will we lay our crowns?

3.2. This is a question not even Jesus could avoid. At the heart of the gospel story, during 40 days in the wilderness, this very question is posed to Jesus, framed as a temptation. But of course, working backwards from what Hebrews says, we know this is our temptation too, since Jesus' temptations were in every way as ours are. Jesus' response in the wilderness restates the scriptural injunction: *you shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve*. In the crowded marketplace of thrones, single-heartedness is both the most needful thing and the most difficult thing.

3.3. Worship is many things: it is an evocation of gratitude, it is an expression of rootedness, it is a communal celebration; it is human beings doing what human beings were created to do; it is our chief end, even! But alongside all this we are reminded today that worship is a choice, a decision, an intentional orientation of our lives towards one throne rather than another, with single focus laying down our crowns before God's throne. Worship is therefore not what we do with some time left over at the beginning of the week; it's not a feel-good meet-up; a wind up, or a pep up. It is a political, whole-life act...which when directed towards the throne of the God we now know in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, is profoundly subversive of the way the world is. When we lay our crowns before God's throne, we declare that we refuse to pay homage to all the other thrones that dominate our world – thrones of gods that try to make us believe that conflict and injustice and death and deception and sin are just the way it is, so we'd better just get used to it and learn to do our best in the midst of it. In a mix and match world of thrones and crowns, it is no wonder we find single-heartedness so difficult. But, as Revelation 4 shows, and Jesus proves, and Wesley, much later, will preach, single-heartedness is essential. We cannot serve two masters. We cannot cast down our crowns before two thrones. The only way to be truly human, to be truly dignified, to have the image of God restored within us, is to participate in this whole-life, single-focused act of laying down our crown before God.

3.4. And to bring us in to land, I simply note that it was this worship that was at the heart of the Wesleyan encounter with grace. What John and Charles Wesley experienced in 1738, and what they spent the remainder of their days trying to comprehend and tell, was the ground-shifting experience of God's gracious generosity in which no other choice becomes intelligible than that of casting down our crowns before God, whatever the consequence. Wesleyan holiness is nothing other than this casting down of our crowns, this repeated submission of our kingdoms and queendoms to God's throne, this continual orientation towards God, growing and strengthening

day by day, means of grace by means of grace, work of mercy by work of mercy, until we are perfected in love – and the vision becomes reality.

3.5. When the 24 elders see the living creatures giving glory, they fall from their thrones, and cast down their crowns. May this be a picture, not of your future, but of your today. May this be your daily, methodical, grace-inspired worship. May this be your true human vocation. May this be your happy and holy desire, until, as Wesley put it, taking your place in that heavenly vision, you cast down your crown before God, lost in wonder, love and praise!