

30th September 2012 – Patronal Festival

Revelation 12: 7-12

19:00 Grahamstown Cathedral

Since Standard four, grade six for those of the younger generation, I have loved 'The Lord of the Rings'! Tolkien's epic tale of how Middle Earth is rescued from the evil designs of the dark lord Sauron. I think part of the reason that I love these books so much is because for the most part it is very easy to distinguish good from evil. Those creatures that serve Sauron are ugly and menacing, while the good guys are handsome and beautiful. Most of the characters, with the exception of Smeagol and Boromir, are either fighting for good or for evil. There is very little grey area and the battle lines are clear. I must admit to my own heart being stirred to grasp up a sword and slay the orc spawn, hell bent on destroying the world.

The imagery employed in the 'Lord of the Rings' books is not entirely different from that which we heard read from the book of Revelation earlier. The author of the Revelation also presents us with a dualistic vision; there is God and there is evil. He is writing to a fairly small Christian community, influenced by and under Roman rule, which he considers entirely evil. The author of the Revelation was utterly convinced that Roman rule was based on oppressive power and therefore utterly opposed to the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus.

Not all Christians, of his time, shared this opinion. The letters of the New Testament make it clear that many Christians had come to terms with the world under Roman rule, and were model citizens of this world. So much so that the author of 1 Timothy could recommend prayers "for kings and all who are in high position, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life." The church presented to us in the letters is sensible, well-structured and respectable. This is probably the Church that we are most familiar with because this has been the dominant pattern of the Church throughout history; Christians have been encouraged to be good citizens.

The question remains, 'Is the label *good citizen* too high a price to pay for passive acceptance of institutions and structures that are, in fact, sinful?' For the author of Revelation the answer was clear! Christians should *not* be good citizens of Rome. Indeed with Rome's oppressive power systems implemented with violence, Christians should oppose this *Babylon* and resist this *Dragon* called Rome! This opposition must be a total rejection of Roman governance along with its use of violence to maintain order. The implication then is that this opposition cannot be won by violence or else it would simply be another form of the same oppressive system. As we read: "And they have conquered him by the blood of the lamb... for they loved not their lives even unto death." Ironically, victory is to be won through defeat! The victim is the victor. Christians would not topple Rome with the sword... but with their own blood!

Our Cathedral is named after St. Michael the Archangel who threw down the devil, that ancient Dragon. Our Cathedral is also named after the story of St. George and the dragon, a mythical tale of a knight who saved a young maiden by killing the Dragon who was about to consume her. The story of St. George and the narrative of the Revelation vividly bring to life the world of spiritual battle! Rowan Williams comments on this: God has made what we can see and manage and what we can't see and can never manage, a universe some of which we can get a grasp of and some of which we can't. This isn't a recommendation not to try to understand, but simply a reminder that not everything is going to be made sense of from our point of view.

We don't get to the end of being baffled amazed and awestruck. Herein lies the importance of talking about angels in Christian teaching. Odd as it may sound, thinking about these mysterious agents of God's purpose, who belong to a different order of being, can be at least a powerful symbol for all those dimensions of the universe about which we have no real idea. Round the corner of our vision things are going on in the universe, glorious and wonderful things, of which we know nothing.

We're so used to sentimentalizing and trivializing angels — they are often reduced to Christmas decorations, fairy godmothers almost. But in the Scriptures angels are often rather terrifying beings occasionally sweeping across the field of our vision; they do God strange services that we can't fully see; they provide a steady backdrop in the universe of praise and worship. They are great beasts, living creatures, flying serpents burning with flames, carrying the chariot of God, filling the Temple in Jerusalem with bellows of adoration, echoing to one another like whales in the ocean. Those are the angels of Isaiah and Ezekiel — anything but Christmas card material.

And sometimes a human form appears to give a message from God and something in the event tells the people involved that this is a moment of terror and truth, and they recognize that they have met an angel in disguise. Now whether or not you feel inclined to believe literally in angels — and a lot of modern Christians have a few problems with them — it's worth thinking of them as at the very least a sort of shorthand description of everything that's going on behind the scenes of our world. I realize that taking angels seriously probably raises a few eyebrows these days; but it's more than just picturesque fantasy that's at stake. Anything that requires us to look beyond that which is easy to see and identify can be immensely helpful to us.

The writer of the Revelation did not shrink from using provocative language to liken Roman governance to evil and demonic forces. If we were to follow his lead, how should we analyze the structures of our own time? What are the 'unseen' dragons of our time, which the angels do battle with? Are there powerful institutions and structures oppressing the people of our land? What machinery gobbles up the innocent? Who does our society sacrifice to the dragons? Should we be good citizens of our country as some of the New Testament letters advise us... or should we heed the more radical voice of the author of the Revelation? The story in Revelation is a challenge to the early Christians to resist Roman oppression. It should also challenge us to take on some of the sinful systems of our time. Brian McLaren identifies large multinational corporations as one of the dragons of our time. He suggests that they often display six characteristics:

First, they show callous unconcern for the feelings of others – such as when our mines distribute a pittance of their wealth to unskilled labour and give disgusting salaries to the few in control.

Second, they display an incapacity to maintain enduring relationships – so if workers in Honduras demand a more just wage, the corporation simply fires them and moves to another city or country.

Third, they show reckless disregard for the safety of others – Like Shell which wants to flagrantly use vast quantities of water to frack the Karoo and risk polluting underground water aquifers.

Fourth, they manifest habitual deceitfulness, lying and conning others when it is profitable to do so – Again Shell promises that shale gas will provide the answer to South Africa's employment problems – not true – It is a high-tech industry serviced by a handful of personnel, most of whom will be foreigners.

Fifth, they fail to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviours – even if that means taking the dubious path of using the law to legitimate the falsification of news. Think of the way in which the initial information of the Marikana Massacre was reported... police defending themselves from unreasonable mineworkers. Then the shock of the autopsies revealing that many miners were shot in the back and more critical independent journalists exposing a second killing field where miners were hunted down by police.

Sixth, in spite of these gross faults, they demonstrate an incapacity to experience guilt, and continue in the previous five behaviour patterns indefinitely.

Brian McLaren then goes on to explain that these six characteristics come from, 'The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the Psychiatric "Bible", and together they constitute a unique diagnosis; psychopath.

I suspect that we could make the same diagnosis of our Government which continues to be a massive disappointment. A friend of mine recently wrote the following to me in an email, and I paraphrase here: “The state has bankrupted itself and we must redirect our institutions, Church and university, so that we put a stop to this downward spiral to hell. It seems to me that the madness we see at the level of the state stems from madmen... whose minds are so distorted that they have completely lost touch with reality. And their power is bolstered in part by the active support or inaction of the neurotic middle class, who have largely decided to lock themselves behind razor wire and view their own country as a passing spectacle of shadows from the comfort of their own colonial fantasies.”

The Author of the apocalypse, the Revelation, was a person who truly encountered God... we often call these people mystics. Bernard McGinn says that mysticism is “a consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and . . . *deeply transforms the subject who has experienced it.*” If it does not deeply change the lifestyle of the person—their worldview, their economics, their politics, their ability to form community—you have no reason to believe it is genuine mystical experience. It is often just people with an addiction to religion itself, which is not that uncommon.

God has mysteriously made a world in which what human beings do can help or hinder what he achieves at any point in the world's history; when we give him space, through our prayerful consent to, and identification with, what he wants things may happen that were otherwise unpredictable. 18 years ago our country experienced the miracle of a relatively peaceful transition to democracy, we desperately need another miracle now and a prejudice against any sort of miracle may be a buried uncertainty about the unfailing presence and action of the Creator, about that burning intensity of divine action that is always around us.

My brothers and sisters, may we become mystics who truly encounter the living God, may we see the angels in the midst of the unseen battle and be moved to acts of love and compassion!

Amen.