

Panel 7 Revelation 12:1-4 Reflections

The red dragon

Being surrounded by this art for 6 weeks, gives us the chance to look in a focused way or to simply allow random thoughts coloured by other outside experiences in our lives to wander the brain cells. Both will bring insights and there is a bit of both this morning

First we hear the passage from Revelation Rev 12:1-4

The Woman and the Dragon

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born.

Several weeks ago, we were listening to a modern piece of music in Beacon Hall. I quite often close my eyes when listening. It was a percussive piece and I pictured myself in a sun-lit forest, green with Spring, and an April shower gently plopping rain drops through the leaves. But almost imperceptibly it seemed the music became louder, more dissonant. The forest darkened, the rain beat down ferociously, the forest crown was tossed by wind. Sun to darkness. The composer had created a real sense of menace.

I had a similar reaction when looking at this panel. Colour and texture as in other panels but there grows a sense of threat. the golden circles don't have the energy of joyful sunlight but there is jaggedness and panic and anxiety are felt There is pain –the swirling engulfing pain of birth. The woman is trapped – bound by the biological function of birth which must progress to a natural conclusion and will progress at its own speed. She is surrounded by the 7 writhing heads of the dragon waiting to devour the baby as soon as it is born. There seems no way out of this terrifying situation

Many people feel trapped – abusive relationships, violence and control by others, addiction, poverty or debt, chronic ill health, being different and therefore vulnerable, young people afraid of the outside world and knife crime, students deeply anxious about whether they can fulfil expectations, maybe we nurse knowledge of past wrongs and guilt. Many feel encircled, menaced and trapped, sometimes by circumstances beyond their control and sometimes by choices they have made.

The seven heads of the dragon threaten. It feels as though you may avoid or defeat one head but the next one is there waiting. The weapons used by the devil are many. We see them every day – semi-truths, flattery, promise of easy gains and so on. In the story of the garden of Eden we first see the subtle deceit of the serpent. He doesn't tell Eve to disobey God but sows doubt in her mind. 'I'm sure God doesn't mean you will die' And that sets a chain reaction in motion and sin enters the world. Adam and Eve are banned from the garden and the relationship with God changes. So when I see the writhing heads of the dragon both here and in other panels, I feel a shiver for the dragon's aim is to lead us away from God's ultimate goodness, to move from freedom to oppression, from hope to despair. God's love is constant, but we choose to move away to the point at which we can no longer recognise it, accept it and share it. The dragon has trapped us

Being bound and trapped is not what God wants for us. -God desires people to be free – for each of us to be able to flourish as a unique child of God, to know God’s love and grow as individuals and in community.

Throughout the Bible there are references to liberation and freedom. Not long ago, our daily readings told the story of the Exodus when a reluctant Moses, moved by God, led the Israelites from slave labour in Egypt to freedom.

The prophets often spoke about the sins of the rich and powerful who used and abused the poor and dispossessed I refer to a moving and challenging chapter in Isaiah. The people complain to God that God ignores them despite all their fancy fasting and religious rites. God gives a robust answer ‘I am not impressed with your performances. The true worship that I want is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless but top of the list is freeing the oppressed.

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke. Isaiah 58 verse 6

God wills that we should be free and not bound by sin and evil and we must play our part in creating that freedom. Yet the dragon is subtle and deceitful.

The dragon is strong- its tail has swept stars from the sky, he is imbued with malevolence and a lust for power, his weapons include seven heads of subtle deceits. Is there any hope for the woman and the child?

Yes there is. At the moment of birth, the baby is snatched away and taken to heaven and the woman is carried to safety in the desert. The dragon is thwarted.

Jacqui Parkinson describes this as a pivotal moment in the story. Yet we see nothing in the panel that suggests what that pivot might be. It has to be the baby- the unseen baby. Which begs the question as to who this baby is and how a tiny scrap of new-born humanity can change the world.

Prayer of confession starting with a Hawaiian Benedictus

God of the slave, hope of the captive, healer of the broken, come to you people and set them free.

In quietness, name a situation that particularly disturbs you because people are oppressed and hurting.

Give thanks for one of hope where love has shone and people come to freedom.

God of love, open our hearts and clear our minds to acknowledge when we have been complicit in creating barriers, when we have not challenged the dragon but chosen to look away

Forgive us for our wrongdoing, show us your way and make us whole

Amen

Clare Campion-Smith

Reflection 2

Gospel Mark 8: 27-29

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' 28 And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' 29 He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'

Who is the baby? How can a tiny scrap of new-born humanity change the world? Our reading from Mark's gospel shines light and offers some answers.

The verses are a pivotal point in Mark's gospel. In the previous chapters two major themes in the story of Jesus are intertwined. One is many accounts of his incredible gifts and the transforming impact on the lives of those who encountered Him. He taught with authority, challenged demonic forces, fed thousands, brought healing and wholeness into broken lives. BUT alongside this growing affirmation of Jesus, we learn of increasing tension and fierce opposition from the powerful religious authorities. So, what were people making of this charismatic and challenging figure.

Jesus asks his disciples Who do People say that I am? He receives 3 different answers but each identified a returning great prophetic figure.

And then Jesus asks "But you, who do you say that I am?" And Peter replies "You are the Messiah." Before the disciples had appeared to lack understanding, then in this instance, Peter has insight. But the disciples are ordered not to share this declaration with anyone. Why should it be a secret?

For Peter and probably for most Jews at that time, 'Messiah' was a promised Saviour of the people, viewed as a militaristic, political figure who would overthrow Rome's power and establish for the Jews a new kingdom of David inaugurating the kingdom of God.

But Jesus says, **the Son of Man**, must endure great suffering, be rejected by all the religious leaders, and killed. Peter takes hold of Jesus and forcefully protests – No, no way will you suffer and die. Jesus' response is shocking - 'Out of my sight Satan.' Peter seemed to have the right title for Jesus but clearly his expectations of the Messiah were wrong.

In his startling response Jesus does not use the word, Messiah. He uses the title Son of Man which appears in several places in Mark, only used by Jesus as a self-designation and usually associated with suffering. Jesus forbids the disciples from identifying him to others as Messiah, for He has not come to triumph over evil with violence but to face and endure the suffering that is involved in confronting evil & meeting hatred with love.

This Son of Man is seen in Panel 7, as the unborn tiny baby who is revealed as Messiah through a life and death of chosen vulnerability and infinite self-giving love.

Jesus response to Peter, "Get out of my sight Satan," relates to Jesus' experience in the wilderness immediately after his baptism and affirmation as God's beloved son. He grappled to understand how was He to use His power to transform? He rejected the temptations to use that power to serve himself, or to seek and exploit earthly authority, status, and power. Instead, he brought wholeness and healing to those tormented and broken, rejected and despised, he held fast to truth and justice, and spread light in darkness and hope in despair. He walked a path of self-giving love and gave his very life in his refusal to compromise with evil.

Having explained to the disciples the path He will take; Jesus spells out to them and other people nearby what it means to follow Him. It means they must be ready to follow his pattern of generous self-giving love and even be prepared to lose their lives. “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? But whoever loses their life for me will gain it.”

In today’s world we have examples of people seeking vastly extended life spans and even hoping for immortality. Most have great wealth, take scores of health supplements a day, have frequent physical and physiological checks, follow extreme exercise and diet regimes and often avoid contact with other people. They consider death undesirable and conquerable. And, as a journalist wrote, they appear to have made so much money they require infinite life to enjoy their wealth. “What good will it be to gain everything in the world but lose your soul.”

What does being prepared to lose your life following Jesus mean?

On a hilltop farm, on the West Bank near Bethlehem is the Tent of Nations. The land owned since 1916 by the Nassars, a Palestinian Christian family. In recent decades they have become surrounded on 3 sides by ever growing Israeli Settlements and the family’s right to the land has been challenged and denied. The Tent of Nations has become a centre where people from many countries can come to learn, to share and build bridges of understanding and hope. Every year in July, a summer camp is held for children from Bethlehem and the surrounding area providing a fun and safe environment to give the children some freedom and distraction and a break from the politics that overshadow their childhood. They seek to build the children’s self-confidence, appreciate their own strengths and abilities, and encourage them to believe that they are able to make a difference and be part of the change towards a better future.

Countless times, the Tent of Nations has been attacked, thousands of trees have been destroyed, and thousands of pounds damage caused. Members of the Nassar family has been threatened and attacked. Daoud Nassar the landowner says, “We want to develop a positive approach to conflict management. In the face of great injustice, we know that we should not hate, despair, or flee. We refuse to be enemies and we try to transform our pain and frustration into positive actions that will help us to create a better future.”

Denying ourselves, being prepared to lose our lives rather than seeking to gain the world is about overcoming our human selfish ambitions and desires and generously giving away our lives in following Jesus. How that looks in practice is different for each person and for each community of faith. It involves prayerful reflection on our gifts and resources and listening, seeing, and feeling the movement of God’s spirit in our lives. We are different in our age, circumstances, responsibilities, health, and other dimensions, these will shape our path. And it changes for each of us over the years.

Following Jesus individually and as a church calls us to generous self-giving of who we are in seeking to further God’s Kingdom of love, justice, and peace.

Christine Stones