

Christ the King, November 24th, 2024

8.00 Holy Communion

Daniel 7.9-10,13,14, John 18.33-37

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

We spent last week in Hunstanton in Norfolk, and while we were there visited the church of St Edmund, king and martyr, appropriately on the eve of the saint's feast day – a VERY Anglo-Catholic church with a long flight of steps up to the extremely high altar, a chapel dedicated to our Lady of Walshingham, and a remarkable set of windows depicting the legend of King, and then Saint, Edmund. On looking up the church on the web to get more information, I was reminded of the story I first heard some years ago of a nine-year-old Norfolk boy called Sampson who in 1144 had a terrifying dream of a menacing, dark figure, arms outstretched, approaching him. He knew him to be the devil. In his terror he cried out "St Edmund, help me" and at once found himself in the protecting, comforting arms of the saint. That dream or vision set the course of his life, and he travelled to Bury to become an oblate of the great Abbey dedicated to the saint, and eventually became its somewhat controversial abbot. Now, if this morning, I began my sermon by telling you that, like Sampson, last night in a dream I had a vision of God on his throne in heaven and wanted to share the words he spoke with you, I suspect that you might think I had completely lost my mind, and some of you would probably have a quiet word with the vicar to make sure I never set foot in this pulpit again. We can't possibly have that sort of thing going on in the Church of England after all. But this morning we do have before us a really rather peculiar vision from the book of the prophet Daniel in the Old Testament. The bible is of course full of visions of different sorts – the prophets in the Old Testament, Isaiah who saw the Lord, high and lifted up enthroned in the temple and surrounded by the cherubim and seraphim; Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones - but in the New Testament too. Jesus's experiences in the desert after his baptism were of a visionary kind; Stephen saw a vision of heaven opened while he was being stoned; Paul saw a vision of Jesus on the Damascus Road and would later write of having other visions when he was transported to heaven. Indeed, much of the bible has visions at its source. And the seeing of visions has a long and respected place in Church history, particularly though the mystics of the medieval period. There was, it appears an accepted way of preparing for such visions by prophets and others – fasting, immersing oneself in scripture and continual prayer – and the visions that resulted were often dressed up in the clothes of what the prophet had been reading and praying about, of his expectations and experience. But for them heaven was opened, and they saw the heavenly world in all its glory. Generally having visions was quite respectable, and indeed expected of prophets and religious leaders. But once the visions had been experienced and written down, which often involved some degree of interpretation, they were then tested by the hearers. The ones that were passed down the generations are those that the hearers felt had some lasting worth, and those only made it into scripture after decades and centuries of

reflection and discernment by either the Jewish scholars or the early church. And such is the case with the vision we have before us this morning.

The book of Daniel describes on the face of it events and visions that took place while the Jews were in exile in Babylon in about 500BC. The early versions of the book may well go back to that time, a time of transition between two leaders – Nebuchadnezzar, portrayed as a relatively benign despot, and Belshazzar, a more threatening figure – it was a time of uncertainty and change for someone such as Daniel who was at the centre of government. However, the book as we have it was put together from the early material at a much later period, around 170BC. The small Jewish state had been at the mercy of the empires around them – the Persians, the Greeks under Alexander and his successors and were now facing a particularly violent and oppressive invader – another threatening, worrying and unsettling time. In the text before today's reading, the prophet had just described in his vision the rising and falling of empires, depicted in very strange terms as a series of three outlandish beasts, with a final vision of another beast devouring all in its path.

After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet.

Then the scene changed, and he saw this vision of God that we have read today – the Ancient of Days – in white clothing, surrounded by fire, on a throne that seems to have wheels – the throne chariot – with innumerable angels around about him. These were all ways that the scriptures of the day would have depicted God – the white clothes denoting purity, the flames reminiscent of Sinai, the throne chariot taken from the prophet Ezekiel. But God here sat in judgement of the nations, the books were opened. Then the scene changed again, and Daniel saw one like a human being approaching God, coming with the clouds of heaven. Or another way of translating this is one like the Son of Man. And to this figure

.....was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

The prophet then goes on to describe the demise of the fourth beast – the court had sat in judgement, which was given in favour of the Son of Man and the holy ones of God. At the time this prophecy was given and received, it was a clear word of encouragement to that small fragile community – that God was on their side, and they would be safe against even the most ferocious of earthly forces. And of course, the tiny Jewish state did endure against all the odds.

The prophecy was preserved however, as it was felt to have enduring worth, and of course it became of huge importance to Jesus and the early church. Jesus identified himself with the ambiguous figure of the Son of Man – both a representative of all humanity, and as a messianic figure. He talked of himself, as coming with the clouds in glory – probably there referring to his ascension rather than any second coming. The words in our reading

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were mirrored by those in the description of Jesus' temptation where the devil showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority.'

But Jesus rejected this easy way to glory and authority and chose a different path before being exalted in heaven. That path was that foreseen by another of the Old Testament prophets – the suffering servant of the book of Isaiah, which again was very influential for both Jesus and the early church

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; Surely, he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

Jesus chose the way of suffering. His path to kingship and authority was utterly different from the way of the world, telling Pilate his kingdom was not of this world. But through his suffering and his resurrection, heaven has been opened for all.

The early church, when it was facing persecution in the time of Nero, also found comfort and reassurance in the vision from the Book of Daniel, and in yet another vision, it was a major influence on John of Patmos in the visions set out in the book of Revelation, where the visions became words of comfort to the Christian community being persecuted by the Emperor Nero.

And for us? Has the vision still got relevance? We live in a very uncertain time, and that uncertainty has increased significantly over the last couple of weeks, in terms of geo-political conflicts, economic affairs and climate issues. It is a time, where the most powerful country in the world is undergoing a traumatic political transition – much like the situation pictured in Daniel. Yet the vision still speaks. God is still in control of nations and states and their rulers, and all authority on heaven and earth has been given to Jesus, the Son of Man, the Suffering Servant. Nations will rise and fall, but the message of the gospel continues. As the hymn writer put it

*Pride of man and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray his trust.
all that human toil can fashion,
tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power, hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.*

But it is not only in the wider world where there is uncertainty. Our own church is of course undergoing a degree of turmoil following the Makin report and the resignation of the archbishop and the divisions over sexuality, and its future leadership and direction is far from clear. Some would indeed go as far as to say that these events pose an existential threat to the church.

The church has been there before of course. Back in Edmund's time, his kingdom of East Anglia was overrun and destroyed by the Viking Great Army, the Christian church

eliminated and he himself martyred. But in the story of the years that followed, we see the formation of the English state and the reestablishment of a nationwide church, which our forebears saw as the hand of God at work.

And so to conclude, whatever the uncertainty, whatever our worries about the future, of our world and our country, of our church, we can hold on to the fact that all authority and power has been given to Jesus, his kingdom has been established, and through the path of suffering he chose, the gate of heaven has been opened for all who believe in him. Our reading today is one to keep close, to rip out of Worship for the Week and pin on our kitchen wall, and to return to, to remind ourselves that the Ancient of Days rules in heaven, and that the Son of Man, our representative and our Lord, our Saviour and our Redeemer, is in his presence, bringing all our needs to his Father, and our temporal and eternal future is secure in him, whatever the uncertainties and the turmoil around us.

I end with a prayer for the church in all its turmoil, from another who experienced both political and ecclesiastical turmoil – William Laud who lived through the reigns of Elizabeth I and the early Stuarts, the Civil War into the commonwealth period. It seems very appropriate.

*Most gracious Father,
we pray to you for your holy Church.
Fill it with all truth;
in all truth with all peace.
Where it is corrupt, purge it.
Where it is in error, direct it.
Where anything is amiss, reform it.
Where it is right, strengthen and defend it.
Where it is in want, provide for it.
Where it is divided, heal it and reunite it in your love;
for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.*