

The ten-horned beast: Daniel ch.7



Today's TFTD comes from Robin:

I have never been a fan of professional darts and so it was only when he died that I became aware of the work of darts commentator, Sid Waddell.

In his obituary I read his famous line, delivered while watching Eric Bristow become world champion, "When Alexander of Macedonia was 33, he cried salt tears because there were no more worlds to conquer ... Bristow's only 27", and I have remembered it ever since.

It's a wonderfully funny line, because of course Bristow's conquest of the world is only in the context of a game played in pubs and bars whereas Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East even as far as India. But it also pokes fun at Alexander the Great whose so-called greatness is actually so meaningless today that he can be eclipsed by a mere darts-player.

Daniel's apocalyptic vision of the four beasts is a vision of the rise and fall of four evil empires. The lion represented Babylon, the empire that brought Daniel and his people into exile, the bear represented the Medes who

usurped the Babylonians (Daniel 5:31) and the leopard represented the Persians who displaced the Medes (Daniel 6:28). The fourth and final beast is Alexander. The beast had ten horns representing the Hellenic successor states that ruled the Middle East after the death of Alexander and the little horn that grew out of the ten horns represents Antiochus IV Epiphanes whose persecution of the Jews was particularly cruel.

Daniel's vision terrified him. At the end of the vision we read, "As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly terrified me, and my face turned pale; but I kept the matter in mind." (Daniel 7: 28).

Because the vision is also a comfort. At the end of the vision all is well. One of the attendants that Daniel speaks to in his vision explains to him the denouement. "But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever – forever and ever." (Daniel 7:18)

And so the book of Daniel gave to Judaism an apocalyptic perspective and Judaism became a faith that endured great suffering and anticipated more suffering but clung onto a vision of final victory. And the Book of Revelation updates this vision for the Christian church. Using some of the same images as appeared in the visions of Daniel, but also adding some new ones, the visions of the Book of Revelation equipped the church to endure suffering, to prepare for more suffering and to keep faith in the final victory.

Both sets of visions deal with real earthly empires. Daniel's vision clearly reflects on Alexander the Great and other conquerors. And the Book of Revelation clearly reflects on the Roman Empire. How then do these visions sustain the church today?

Maybe a vision about the rise and fall of empires today would begin with a vision of a lion whose rise and fall represented the rise and fall of the British Empire, followed by an eagle representing the rise and fall of the United States of America and then a dragon representing the rise and fall of China. Note how easy it is for me to find a beast for each empire, a beast that is 'terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong.' (Daniel 7: 7)

Of course, sitting here in Britain today, many of us have positive feelings about the British Empire and the present world order dominated by the United States. I would respectfully suggest these positive feelings are in large part because of where we are sitting. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs as many people have observed, and neither can Empires be built without conquest and conquest means suffering, humiliation and death, about which Daniel knew a very great deal as do people living in many parts of the world today.

It is easier to understand what empires bring when we consider that our grandchildren and great grandchildren are likely to live in a world dominated by China. Like the British Empire, modern China has some things to commend it. It is an economic success story that has also been reasonably successful in improving living standards across its whole society. It deals well with challenges like the coronavirus and climate change. But when we look at the crackdown on liberty in Hong Kong and the oppression of the Uighurs, we must surely shudder as we wonder what it is our descendants will have to endure.

How will they endure it? How will they sustain themselves through suffering that may last for generations?

They will endure if they have faith that this suffering too will pass. That one

day the empire that oppresses them will be nothing more than a witticism to fill up a TV commentary about a silly pub game. That one day the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever – forever and ever.

By the grace of God, may we keep this vision alive in the minds of our children and our children's children that they may also keep it in mind as Daniel did.