

The return of the beast: Revelation ch.13



Today's TFTD is from Robin

Last Friday my Thought for the Day reflected on the vision of the beasts in Daniel 7. Today, reading Revelation 13, I see that Daniel's beasts have returned, this time in some ghastly amalgamation: John writes, "The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion" (Rev 13: 2).

There is a lot of suspicion about the Book of Revelation. People openly question why we read this stuff. The visions of John are incredibly violent and they paint a world where violence is endured and then repaid with more violence. This is not necessarily the spiritual solace that people come to church for. And the images are so fantastical. Today's beast is a third leopard, a third bear and a third lion. As somebody said to me last week, you need to be smoking something pretty strong to read this stuff.

John says he received this image from Jesus but that does not mean it is provenance is outside the Scriptural tradition. John's beast is an amalgam of the beasts that Daniel saw. The lion represented the Babylonian Empire which was usurped by the Medes, represented by the bear, who in turn were overthrown by the Persians represented by the leopard. In John's vision these tyrants become one beast; one enemy which became manifest in his life as the Empire of Rome.

The Empire of Rome subjected John's people and all the people it encountered to brute force and extreme violence and oppression. And it falsely presented the conquerors of people, the Emperors, as gods to be worshipped. And people did worship them as the people worshipped the beast in John's vision, impressed by the power of the Emperors and the blasphemous lies they told (Rev 13:4). We see them in Albrecht Dürer's picture.

By updating the vision of Daniel to fit his own lived experience, John gives divine authority for people to apply the images in his visions to their lived reality. For example, anti-apartheid campaigner Allan Boesak wrote, "*What was true in the time of John has proven to be true over and over again in the history of the church ... Your fate shall be the fate of Babylon, which is called Egypt, which is called Rome, which is called Pretoria.*"

John demands of the reader that his vision be accepted as a revelation of Jesus Christ. Just as Stephen received a revelation of Jesus in heaven just before he died and Paul received a revelation on the road to Damascus and Peter received a revelation when he dreamed a dream in Joppa; now John is saying, 'Well, here's my revelation.' Jesus may have ascended into heaven, but he communicates with us still; directly and one-to-one; that is

the assumption that underpins the idea that all these visions are genuine revelations of the word of God.

In the early church many people said they received these revelations. Many people actively sought revelation through fasting and prayer and various mystical practices. And when they received revelations, they wrote them down to share them with others. There was an extensive literature of revelation circulating in the early church. In the end all these written revelations were discarded and suppressed. Only the Revelation of John was included in the final version of the New Testament that has been handed down to us.

When the decision was made to include the Revelation of John in the New Testament, discarding other revelations, the situation the church found herself in was very different to the situation in John's time. John wrote to churches suffering from fearful persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. But when his revelation was accepted as Holy Scripture, the church was the established religion of that same Roman Empire. Whereas before the church suffered persecution, now the church was in a position to persecute heretics who did not agree with the creeds that had been agreed in the presence of the Emperor Constantine.

Who or what then, was represented by the beast? Reading the text within the context of John of Patmos, we can clearly see he means to indicate the Roman Empire and the Emperor cult. But the church of Constantine found something else in the text; a beast that uttered blasphemies; "The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise its authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven." (Rev 13: 5-6)

And so the reading of this text pivoted. It became the text to consult if you doubted the necessity to stamp out heresy. John's images of violence became the justification for violence that was visited on people who held opposing views, followed different faiths, read your own scared texts differently.

Sometimes I reflect when I bump into Father Matthew as I walk around Alderley Edge and give him a cheery greeting, that time was that I would have been expected to report the activities of a foreign-born Catholic priest in my parish in full expectation that he would be arrested, tortured and executed. And I shudder.

People who object to religion will often say that religion causes so much violence in the world. I can understand why they say that.

So we have to treat the Revelation of John with very great care. We can read it as a vision that will help us to endure suffering; to give us hope of a final victory over violence and lies. But we must beware the danger that we become drawn into the violence and lies ourselves.

Friedrich Nietzsche grew up in a vicarage and I think he knew what he was writing about when he wrote, “Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster... for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.”

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