

Inauguration as Primate of Australia
St Michael and All Angels
29 September 2005
The Most Rev'd Dr Phillip Aspinall

Daniel 7.9-10, 13-14

Psalm 138

Rev 12.7-12a War in heaven, dragon thrown down

John 1.45-51 'You will see ... angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'

Tonight's second reading from the Revelation to St John readily excites the religious imagination. It could well be read as a kind of melodrama, with appropriate participation by the congregation:

'War broke out in heaven' 'Ooh...' This is not good. We don't think of heaven as place where there is war. Heaven is where peace and harmony reign and where every tear is wiped away.

'Michael and his angels fought against the dragon' 'Yeh. Go for it Michael!' Michael is the good guy, in the white hat. The dragon is the evil one.

'The dragon and his angels fought back' 'SSSS.'

'but they were defeated' 'Hoorah!!'

'and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.' 'Um. That seems a bit harsh, but they were probably asking for it.'

'The great dragon was thrown down' 'Yes!!'

'that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' 'Hoorah! Away with deception!'

'he was thrown down - - - to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him' 'Ah ... to the earth? Are you sure that's such a good idea Michael?'

And then unfolds the mixed reaction to the declaration that the dragon has been defeated: heaven rejoices, but woe to the earth where the dragon's wrath is unleashed because he knows his time is short (12.10, 12).

The passage portrays the same kind of archetypal struggle depicted in the literature and mythology of many cultures. Here, though, it has a Christian setting with the defeat of the dragon being accomplished by 'the blood of the Lamb' and by the 'testimony' of those who 'did not cling to life even in the face of death' (12.11).

'the blood of the Lamb', a metaphor for the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the power by which the dragon is slain. And the saints and martyrs 'who did not cling to life even in the face of death' share the vocation of dragon-slaying with him.

Here, and in many cultures, the dragon is a symbol of the powers and forces that destroy life, that consume people, that demolish communities and wreak havoc with unimaginable power.

Notice that the dragon is referred to as 'that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world. (12. 9).

In scripture Satan appears as the accuser, the prosecutor in the heavenly court, the one who brings charges against an accused. But the line is easily crossed between accusation and false accusation, between charge and slander. Satan the accuser becomes diabolos (the Devil) the slanderer.

So the dragon emerges as a figure that tempts people into situations which will give rise to accusations and charges. The dragon becomes the tempter, the seducer, deceiving people into patterns of thinking and acting that destroy, the enemy and opponent of truth.

And so the archetypal struggle of the human situation is portrayed. Human beings, prone to being deceived, vulnerable to being seduced into wrong choices that destroy, always under attack, and yet always struggling towards the birth of a higher life. The dragon, the power of evil, the enemy of truth, lurks, waiting to deceive, to frustrate the upward reach of humanity. This is life as we know it.

Now, on an occasion such as the inauguration of a new Primate our thoughts naturally turn to the role and priorities of the national church at this time in the history of our nation and world. And the invitation before us tonight is to approach that focus through the metaphor of the dragon and the vocation of the church as dragon-slayer.

Where, then, lurk the dragons of our day? What shape do they take? Where is the fire that consumes individuals, that destroys communities, that threatens goodness? Where are we deceived into choices that destroy?

Well, their name is legion!

There is that dragon called materialism which flies in company with its siblings secularism and consumerism. This seduction would have us believe not only that life consists in the abundance of possessions but also that acquiring ever increasing volumes of things is both actually possible **and** good. Whereas the truth, according to one assessment, is that for everyone in the world to enjoy the same standard of living as is enjoyed in, say, Mosman in Sydney, we would need 7 planet earths to resource it (Browning, 2005, 8).

There is that dragon - instrumentalism - which would have us believe that human beings can be used or disposed of to achieve whatever ends seem desirable. This dragon has many lairs in the debates about abortion and euthanasia, reproductive technologies and stem cell research. It takes flight in company with the argument that because science **can** - it **should**. Whereas the truth is that careful and deep reflection on the honour due to human life is necessary in all these situations.

The dragons of individualism and hedonism often take flight together. Where each individual becomes the centre, and that one's pleasure becomes the yardstick, should we be surprised that isolationism and the fracturing of community are the offspring that soon spread their wings?

Racism and sexism are dragons long identified yet still roaming freely diminishing the lives and worth of many.

Terrorism spits white hot fire into the midst of the innocent in the name of a strange sense of justice distorted beyond recognition.

Ignorance and prejudice maintain boundaries of isolation and lead to fear, hatred, fragmentation and violence.

Each of these dragons in our own day, like dragons from time immemorial, appears unstoppable. They represent invincible tyranny.

Evil is real and flourishing in our community, in disguises which include rampant materialism, unchecked scientific advancement, apparent prosperity and supposed security measures. Evil doesn't always frighten. In fact it can dress in the finest clothes. It is deceptive, seductive, attractive.

But Australians know, intuitively, that there's something not quite right. A general dissatisfaction persists beneath the surface despite a culture of acquisition. There's a kind of emptiness in the soul.

In the face of this unnamed dissatisfaction a major intellectual and spiritual issue today, in Australia and more broadly, is to put moral and spiritual values and insights alongside the deceptions and seductions of these dragons.

Christians are custodians of an alternative vision of what it means to be human. A vision of a meaningful, satisfying, fulfilling way to live. This vision is an antidote, a cure. It does not remove human frailties or vulnerabilities. It certainly does not make church people mistake-free. The dragons of today are no respecters of distinction between church members and others. They wreak their havoc within the church as well as everywhere else.

And yet, despite its shortcomings and evident failures, underpinning the church and the good it does in the community is another vision of human being.

To be truly human, to be fully alive, is to live on the basis of a spirituality that flies in the face of the seductions that surround us most of the time. It is to be somewhat childlike, to be teachable, to remain humble, to eschew pride and arrogance and to be reverent towards other people and towards the natural world. Cultivating a mature spirituality of this sort moves in the opposite direction to the way we usually acquire knowledge – where the pattern is becoming the expert and gradually exercising more and more power (Wallace, 2005).

What will meet the hunger and dissatisfaction beneath the surface of our lives today, is a spirituality that permeates everything we do. That spirituality will be founded on a mature,

discerning and humble thoughtfulness. With reverence and humility we are to explore the ethical and spiritual dimensions of each aspect of our daily lives (ibid).

In a narcissistic culture we recognize that each person is created in the image of God. In an individualistic culture we recognize that we are called into relationships with God and with each other. In a hedonistic, consumerist culture we see that we find our lives by losing them and discover fulfillment by spending ourselves in service to God and others. In a culture sick from the abuse of power we see humility as virtue. In a fragmented world and church we affirm that we are reconciled across all divisions and boundaries.

Paradoxically, this mature, thoughtful, humble, discerning spirituality is the weapon that pierces the dragons' apparently impregnable armour.

In fact, it already has. The struggle of the dragon to frustrate what is good and true reaches its climax on the cross. But it does not hold sway.

The manner of Jesus Christ's life and death, 'by the blood of the Lamb' as St John puts it, is the peculiar power by which the dragon has been conquered.

Our vision of humanity born again, born from above, flows from that life. In fact the new vision was made flesh in Jesus Christ, a human life filled to the brim with heavenly life, divine life. This divine and human one fulfilled humanity's upward reach in God's downward stoop.

Our part in the outworking of the struggle is to abide in Christ, to grow up into him. That is, to be so united with him and with each other that the shape and character of his life – his humility, reverence and service - flows into ours, making us his healing, reconciling presence in the world.

This is our vocation, our privilege and our joy. May this character pervade our church and be our gift to the world.

Amen.

References

Browning, George

2005 Presidential Address to the Synod of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulbourn.

Wallace, Tom

2005 Unpublished address to the Australian Anglican Schools Network Conference, Launceston Church Grammar School, Launceston, Tasmania.