

St. Aidan's West Epping, 19th May 2019

“THE GREAT SPIRITUAL WAR”

(Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 12; John 13:31-35)

War is evil. Its victims are not just members of armies and military forces. Families and loved ones and communities also suffer, even when victory is won. Nowadays with the use of modern weapons, non-combatants are directly caught up in the carnage. As I was reminded in a newspaper story a few days ago, children are becoming more and more directly the victims of war. And with the recent use of landmines and such weapons, the wars continue on, bringing injury and death to future generations.

War is a terrible thing. Surely the only justification for going to war is that the alternative is even worse. And sadly in this world, that has sometimes been the case.

In the Book of Revelation, an ongoing theme is that there is a war going on: a spiritual war, and in Chapter 12, this is spelt out in particularly clear terms. This chapter begins the second half of the book, and if we read the following chapters we shall meet some strange and intimidating figures, including two destructive beasts and the great whore. But before their introduction we meet three characters in today's reading who help us to see the direction this book is taking.

The first character is “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars”. She is crying out as she gives birth to a child. Who is this woman?

The second character is “a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads”. His tail sweeps down a third of the stars from heaven and throws them to earth. Clearly this is a creature of great power, but also a very destructive creature.

But here the creature stands waiting for the woman to give birth: he wants to devour, to destroy the woman's child. Who is this creature?

And then there is a third character: the male child who is born to the woman, who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron. Who is this?

Actually this is a straightforward character to identify, for Psalm 2 points us to the answer. As the kings of the nations gather in rebellion, the Lord sets his chosen king on Zion, his holy hill. This is ultimately the Messiah, who will break these rebels with a rod of iron. If they will not submit to him, they will suffer the consequences.

So the child born to the woman is the Messiah, whom we know to be the Lord Jesus. His rod of iron is not used by him primarily as a weapon to destroy rebels, but rather as a symbol of his powerful rule.

However what happens to this child is rather surprising. When he is born to the woman, he is immediately snatched away and taken to God and his throne. That doesn't sound like the story of Jesus as we know it! What about his teaching and healing ministry, his arrest and crucifixion, and his resurrection? John seems to ignore them or omit them here, and yet they are at the heart of our own understanding of Jesus.

But John wants us to see a bigger picture of the rule of Jesus! Of course, Jesus did those things we read about in the Gospels. But the important thing here is that the dragon was not able to devour him, and to prevent Jesus' ministry taking place.

But who then is the woman? Is it Mary, who after all is the actual mother of Jesus? The way this woman is described, with sun and moon and crowns of stars, would seem rather strange for Mary. But the crown of twelve stars points us in a slightly different direction. Remember that in Revelation, twelve often points to the community of God's people: the twelve patriarchs, the twelve tribes, the twelve apostles. And this gives us a better understanding of what John is telling us. Jesus is born from the community of God's people – the people of Israel as the covenant people, the church as the community becomes – and of course Mary is the member of that community who has the privilege of giving birth to the baby Jesus.

Who then is the destructive and powerful dragon? A few verses later we are told. He is “that ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world”. We are told in verse 7 that there is war in heaven. Michael the archangel and his angels fight against the devil, the evil one.

This picture of him as the great serpent links him to the story of the Garden of Eden: it is ultimately he who persuades Adam and Eve that it is better to disobey God in the vain hope of being like God, rather than living lives of obedience in fellowship with God. In the Old Testament we get various images of the devil, the adversary or enemy of God's people. He is the Satan, the accuser of God's people, who seeks to put up barriers between them and God: for instance when he seeks to undermine Job in his faithfulness to God.

And when does this war take place in heaven? John doesn't tell us: in a sense, we are simply to see this spiritual war as the background to our own experience in this world, where the devil is still at work. The war will continue on until the last day. And we are involved in this war, as members of the community of God's people.

The devil is powerful: how can **we** succeed if he is seeking to destroy us? We keep in mind that Jesus **was** able to fulfil his ministry. Herod was not able to murder him as a baby. The temptations of the devil did not distract him from his purpose. The deadly opposition of Jewish religious leaders was turned into the means by which Jesus brought salvation to the world. The death of Jesus led to the triumphant resurrection.

Satan did not succeed with Jesus. He was not able to prevent the woman giving birth. And we are told that the woman has been provided for in the wilderness. The wilderness is not a comfortable place: the people of Israel certainly found it difficult, and it was a place of temptation. But eventually the people of Israel reached the Promised Land.

And John seems to be describing the situation of the church now, in the wilderness of this world gone wrong. He is reminding us that being Christians is not normally going to be easy and comfortable, but we can be sure that God will provide for our real needs, so that we will find our way to the Promised Land. The church, we are told, will be nourished for 1260 days, 3½ years, a limited time, a time that **will** come to an end. Ultimately that will be when Jesus returns in glory to gather his people to himself.

But more than that. We are told that God's people have actually conquered the devil. How can that be? They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb. Through the death of Jesus, in whom we trust, we are assured of forgiveness and also assured that we will be welcomed into God's kingdom. We are on the winning side in this spiritual war!

And God's people also conquer Satan by the word of their testimony. Victory comes to us as we are faithful to Jesus, and faithful witnesses to Jesus. Victory comes to us as we are prepared to suffer for Jesus' sake, and even to die for Jesus' sake.

Perhaps significant suffering for Jesus, let alone dying for him, seems unlikely for us Christians in Australia. But there are Australian Christians serving Jesus in other lands where opposition to the Gospel is powerful and violent. I think of a missionary couple I know who have been working in Bangladesh for quite a few years. They have been serving the people there, setting up for them the means by which they can drink clean safe water instead of the arsenic-affected water which has been causing dreadful health problems. It is what they have had to use up till this ministry began, because of irresponsible mining in the area. But when our friends send their newsletters they have to avoid words like *Jesus*, and *church*, and *pray*, and *Christian*, because the authorities may well check their emails, and could easily send them home and end their great work- or perhaps something even worse - to them or to those whom they serve.

And of course, even in our own country, Christianity does not have the community acceptance that it once had. Who knows what restrictions and challenges are down the track for the church even in Australia?

But we **are** part of that great community for which God cares, the community which is still tested out during this time of the devil's dying struggles. Jesus has won the victory, and we share in it by God's grace.

But Jesus calls us not only to receive his eternal blessing. He calls us to play our part in that spiritual war: not only trusting in Jesus, but faithfully in our own situation bearing witness to his love, by our lives and by our gracious but positive words, honouring Jesus Christ our living and victorious Saviour. Amen.

Paul Weaver

