

WAR IN HEAVEN – TROUBLE ON EARTH

(Revelation 12.1-17 and Matthew 2.13-23)

What did you make of it then – that reading from Revelation?

Weird or what? The pregnant woman in birth pains, dressed in the sun, standing on the moon, crowned with 12 stars. Then the red seven-headed dragon with ten horns, seven coronets and a tail swishing stars down from heaven to earth, poised to eat the child at the moment of its birth. But before he can do so, the child, who is going to rule the nations, is whisked away to God's throne while the woman takes refuge in a specially prepared place in the desert. Then, in heaven, Michael and the angels take on the dragon and his supporters who are thrown down to the earth. The dragon pursues the woman but she escapes using a pair of wings borrowed from a huge eagle.

Well that's perfectly clear isn't it? Or do we need to be as astute as Sherlock Holmes to understand it?

Holmes and Dr. Watson went on camping trip. As they lay down for the night, Holmes said, 'Watson, look up into the sky and tell me what you see.' Watson looked up and said 'I see millions and millions of stars'. Holmes asked, 'And what does that tell you?' Watson answered thoughtfully, 'Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Theologically, it tells me God is great and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes?' Holmes voiced his decision, 'Someone has stolen our tent!'

Back to Revelation. The clue to understanding it is in the first five words of the passage – *Then a great sign appeared*. This is all picture language!

Those who write about these things, and are far more learned than you or me, write learnedly at great length and vary slightly in their working out of the picture language but most agree that:

The woman represents Israel – the chosen people of God, promised a Messiah – and, in the later part of picture, the Church

The dragon represents Satan or the devil.

Satan wants to thwart God's plan for a Messiah but is himself thwarted.

The woman and her child escape to places of safety.
After a battle, Satan is kicked out of heaven but is active on earth.
The Church is attacked by Satan but Satan is outwitted.

Let's leave Revelation for the time being.

It had been a grim time. Mary was heavily pregnant. They could find nowhere to stay and ended up in a grotty cowshed. The baby, who they knew to be God's son, was born successfully but the only place for him to sleep was a mucky feeding trough.

Then things began to get better, if a bit strange. First there were the scruffy shepherds saying angels had told them about this special baby and where to find him. Later came three very posh men dressed to the nines. Not only were they posh, they brought some rather expensive presents. Things were looking up. But then Herod comes into the picture.

Was it just last Advent or the one before that we saw the BBC film *The Nativity*? Do you remember that brilliant portrayal of Herod – lying on a couch, leaning on one elbow with a plate of sweetmeats in front of him and not stopping to eat them as he heard about the arrival of the wise men at his border. Can you picture that face, at once self-indulgent yet unhappy?

Yes, self-indulgent, unhappy; but cunning too. *Tell them: I too would like to worship the new king you are looking for so please come back and let me so I know where I can find him.*

Imagine his fury when he hears that the wise men (prompted by God - but he does not know that) escape his clutches and his territory and return to their own country. What can this cunning, self-indulgent, unhappy king do to make sure this new king is no threat to him; no challenge to his petty kingdom? Of course! If all the male children of the right age are killed he is bound to have killed this new king and disposed of the threat he poses. And so, the order goes out. And it is worth noting, in passing, that Matthew (again connecting the Old Testament with the New) quotes the prophet Hosea and, a bit later, Jeremiah.

Mary and Joseph are still on a high after the visit of the wise men and their presents but no sooner had they gone off, than Joseph has a dream and

things get bad again. Take the whole family to Egypt he is told by an angel. Egypt! A journey of many, many, miles! Eventually after Herod's death, prompted by another angel they come back - not to Israel but to Nazareth in Judea to keep away from Herod's successor son.

Isn't Christmas a lovely time – all about a happy event, a new baby, people welcoming him, people bringing him presents?

But let's dig down a bit. That baby, the Prince of Peace, was a threat before he could walk, before he could talk. A threat to Herod and therefore made a refugee, a possible threat to Herod's successor so he had to be brought up in a strange town. As a man, he was a threat to the religious powers and to the Roman occupiers. He was such a threat that he was tried, tortured and executed. His followers were hunted down and still are.

The world then was not much different from our world today. How many refugees are there from the fighting in Syria and Iraq? Children are dying in Yemen because two factions both want that territory and will do anything to get it. Israel and the Palestinians are at each other's throats – each sees the other as a threat. Bangladesh is struggling to cope with thousands of refugees driven out of Myanmar.

We have seen how often Matthew quotes from the Old Testament. He wants us to see Jesus as a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies.

The quote from Hosea, *Out of Egypt I called my son*, is not looking back to old Israel's exodus from slavery but to show that the baby Jesus represents the new Israel who will, despite opposition for the old Israel, do what God intended the old Israel to do – to introduce him, that's God, to the whole world as its redeemer.

The bit from Jeremiah about Rachel weeping for her children is there to remind Matthew's readers that, though in the Old Testament things were grim for Israel, Jesus has come to bring hope and salvation even in the middle of a grim world.

Right at the end of our Matthew reading, he tells us that he was to be called an inhabitant of Nazareth. The name means *a branch*. Isaiah talks about the Messiah being a branch of Jesse – a fresh start for the House of King David.

Is all heavy stuff, isn't it? Maybe, but appearances can be deceptive.

A vicar was visiting an elderly lady parishioner and he noticed a big bowl of peanuts on the nearby coffee table. 'May I take a few?' he asked. 'Please do' said the lady. They chatted for about an hour and as the vicar got up to leave, he realised that he had nearly emptied the bowl. 'I'm terribly sorry for eating all your peanuts. I only meant to take a few' 'Oh, that's all right' replied the lady, 'Ever since I lost my teeth, all I can do is to suck the chocolate off them.'

Appearances can indeed be deceptive. However grim things seemed, God was there all the time. Remember how (earlier in Matthew's gospel) God persuaded Joseph to take his fiancée on and look after her when all the evidence was that the pregnant Mary had been playing fast and loose. God was there again in thwarting Herod's plan that the wise men would tell him where Jesus was to be found so he could kill this possible rival. God was there again in Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to safety in Egypt. God was with Jesus during the whole of his earthly life, in all he had to suffer and undergo. God brought Jesus back to life to offer mankind the chance of eternal life.

We started with that weird passage from Revelation – a picture of war and conflict, yes, but do you remember how it ended?

The women and her child find a place of safety.

Satan, the devil, is expelled from heaven.

Satan turns his evil attention to earth but ultimately is vanquished.

This year we in this country have experienced a number of terrorist incidents: On 22nd March a convert to Islam killed four people by driving a car at them on Westminster Bridge and then stabbed a policeman to death.

In early June, again on a bridge in London, people were again killed by men in a car who then ran amok with knives in a local market.

But perhaps the one which affected most people in one way or another was the bomber at the Manchester concert by Ariana Grande.

However, the response to that tragedy was another concert, 'Love Manchester' at which a number of artists took part – including Ariana Grande

and the 24 year old Justin Bieber. I never imagined I would quote a pop star but I want to end by telling you what he said:

"I'm not going to let go of hope. I'm not going to let go of love. I'm not going to let go of God. God is good in the midst of darkness. God is good in the midst of the evil. God is in the midst, no matter what's happening in the world. God is in the midst and he loves you and he's here for you."

Amen to that.