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The vision of Daniel

***The four beasts***

Daniel 7: 1-14

Do you ever despair of the world – do you ever wonder what on earth will come next? The last 10 years seam to have been one history changing event after another. BREXIT, COVID, the first Trump presidency, the war in Ukraine, the war in the Middle East, the goings on in South Korea, the forthcoming second Trump presidency…

It's not just world events that are shaking us – church life is not what it once was. Churches are struggling, numbers are falling, influence is waning. In our own circumstances things seem to change at an alarming rate, sickness is on the rise, hospital waiting lists are through the roof, at times life just seems to be one struggle after another.

I met another family this week who are being forced out of their home in Portstewart and they have nowhere to go. I hear of more and more families struggling just to keep going, to keep their heads above water.

Every time we hear these stories, be they on the world stage or in our street or in our families we wonder, how long, when will everything settle down, when will we get some normality.

Actually, it is into this context that Daniel describes the strange visions he had. This morning, we read about a vision of four bizarre animals coming out of the sea which had been whipped into a frenzy by what Daniel described as the four winds of heaven.

This is a picture of chaos and turmoil. It is a description of what life was like for Daniel and his fellow Jews who were living in exile in Babylon. Later in the chapter when Daniel asked the angel in his vision what it all meant he was told the four beasts where 4 kingdoms, the animal with the strange horns, yet more kings who will come from the last kingdom.

This is a picture of a continuing society that is boastful, proud, ungodly – a society that acts against God’s people, a society that rips then apart and tramples them under the dust – probably both literally and metaphorically. A society that inflicted physical harm and social harm.

It is a description of life in Babylon.

We need to be careful in how we apply these visions to our world. The dream was given and recorded in a way that meant something to Daniel first of all, but also to the people he described it to. It speaks specifically about the circumstances in which Daniel and his generation found themselves living. We can’t and shouldn’t be trying to identify kingdoms today as any of the four beasts. What we can do is take the principles of the dream and apply them to our world. The reason we can do that is because of the second part of this vision.

After Daniel described the chaos and terror of the four beasts the vision shifted in terms of its focus. Instead of Daniel’s eyes being drawn to the chaos and terror he saw thrones being set in place – and among these thrones one who is described as the Ancient of Days, God himself, took his place.

The description of God is important, his white hair signifies his wisdom, the white clothes his righteousness, the fire flowing from him judgement and authority. So, into the chaos and terror is one who is perfectly wise, perfectly holy and perfectly just. This is no minor court, this is a huge court, it is a powerful court symbolised by the numbers of people attending the ancient of days and those who were simply in his presence.

The first action of this court was to open books. We are not told what these books were, but if we take the example of other places in scripture, they are either the books containing the names of the elect – those who have trusted in the blood of the lamb, or the books of record, books containing the actions of every living creature. Either way there is a sense of judgement here.

While this court was assembling the creature with all the horns… horns represent power and authority in scripture, this creature continues to boast. It thinks highly of itself, we must assume it is boasting against God. Look at me, I am the greatest, I have the power and the authority – it is a challenge to the ancient of days.

Daniel simply tells us that as he looked so this creature was slain and its body destroyed and the other creatures, they were stripped of their authority and allowed to live for only a period of time – their days were numbered.

All of this coincided with the arrival of one like a son of man. One who was given all the authority, glory and sovereign power, one who was worshiped by all peoples of all nations and all languages. This is a description Jesus took for himself in the New Testament. The defeat of these beasts, the stilling of the chaos coincides with the power and authority, glory and worship being given to Jesus.

Folks, as we start a new year, we need to realise that the chaos, the confusion, the uncertainty, the arrogance, the rebellion against God from this world will not go on for ever!

Whatever we face today, the sickness, the grief, the loss of our place or sense of belonging in this world. It is only for a time because whatever throne, whatever beast has come out of the sea, whatever kingdom we now live under, there is a throne, an ancient of days, one like a son of man whose kingdom and rule is very different.

Notice how these kings have any power and authority stripped from them, but the one like a son of man: ***His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*** (Daniel 7:14)

History has shown from Nebuchadnezzar himself, through to the Greeks, Romans, people like Hitler, Stalin and those who followed him, diseases like the plague, Spanish Flu, Covid they all pass. They all have their time – but God, the rule of Jesus Christ never passes.

Folks, we need to see beyond the terrifying animals in Daniel’s vision. That is not to say that we don’t take seriously the fact that we live in a world that is in opposition to God, or we don’t take seriously the fact that the church in the west, that our own church is struggling today. We take these things seriously by remembering that the ancient of days is on his throne, his court is in session and he is opening the book and he will pass judgement, not just against those powers that oppose him, but in favour of his people the church of Jesus Christ, the one who is like a Son of Man.

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu said this when giving evidence at a South African government enquiry into the role of the church at the height of Apartheid: ***We are not a fly by night, tu’penny, ha’penny, merely human organisation. No, we are part of the church of God!***

Folks, take heart – for no matter what we are facing, no matter how things appear, no matter how battered and bruised we may feel at times we are not a ***tu’penny, ha’penny, merely human organisation. No, we are part of the church of God!***

The challenge this morning is for us to stop living like a tu’penny, ha’penny, human organisation, embarrassed of our gospel and fearful of what people think of us and to start living like the church of God, believing that the Ancient of Days is on his throne and the one like the Son of Man has come and indeed will come again on the clouds of heaven and so the powers of this kingdom and all other kingdoms will be stripped and given to the church: Let’s be the church that has the vision of Daniel and so lives in the power of the Kingdom that never ends.