

Magdalen College
Evensong
4th Sunday before Advent
Daniel 2.1-11; Revelation 7.9-17

This is the season when the Church approaches the end of its calendar before the new year on Advent Sunday. Our scripture readings for this evening reflect the Bible's preoccupation with endings-in-time; the ending of particular human epochs, the fate of empires and their rulers. Our first reading from Daniel, and our second from Revelation, are both concerned with the contrast between earthly power and the power of God.

From the Bible's perspective empires come and go, rise and fall, some are better than others, but all in their different ways fall short, not least because all are tempted to worship their rulers and their deities instead of the true God. The Biblical perspective is that of the Jews whose fate was to be sandwiched between rival and sometimes threatening powers: the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, the Babylonians, the Chaldeans, the Persians, the Seleucids, the Greeks and the Romans.

So Jewish scripture mocks those who claim to have absolute power in this world. Enter Nebuchadnezzar, the archetype of the strong man, the long-lived king of Babylon who laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, dragging the population of Judea into exile. The book of Daniel was written some centuries after the events it describes. It dates from the period when Jews were actually threatened by the Seleucids, rulers of Syria just to the North. It projects the story back into the past to make the point that idolatrous powers always make the same mistake. Now, as then, the book of Daniel insists, the whole idea of the strong man is flawed. So here is the great Nebuchadnezzar, mighty in military power, surrounded by his flunkies. But look, he's troubled. He can't sleep because when he drops even for a moment he has this terrible dream. He may be all-powerful in his waking life, but he has no control over his unconscious. Desperate, as only insomniacs can be, he consults his experts, the elite magicians of his court. But even as he commands them to interpret his dream he is riven with doubt. The quite reasonable request from the magicians that he describes his dream to them stabs him with a new anxiety – surely if they are as good as they are supposed to be they should know what the dream is before he has to tell them? So he threatens and bullies them, until someone remembers the clever Jewish hostage, Daniel and he comes and sorts the whole thing out, interpreting the dream with a clever mix of flattery and warning.

There's a lot more in Daniel about the flaws of the strong man. Nebuchadnezzar wants to stamp his image on the imagination of his subjects, so he has a massive golden statue of himself constructed on an open plain where it can be seen for miles around. Nebuchadnezzar commanded an orchestra to cue the moment when everyone is to bow and worship his image. Everyone does so on cue. But some of the Jewish exiles have failed to turn up to this idolatrous nonsense and because of their refusal they are flung into the burning fiery furnace – and subsequently – because God is on their side – they are rescued by an angel.

Later in the book of Daniel Nebuchadnezzar's vulnerability is poignantly revealed when he has a mental breakdown and is driven out of human society to live as an animal 'until

his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers and his nails became like birds' claws'. After that he is converted, as it were, and acknowledges Daniel's God, the true God of heaven.

The book of Daniel also speaks of another Babylonian ruler Belshazzar who is struck down in the middle of a great banquet as he casually drinks wine from sacred vessels stolen from the temple in Jerusalem. As he imbibes an invisible hand hovers over the feast and writes mysterious words on the wall which signify the end of his kingdom. And that very night he died.

It is wonderful stuff, satirical fiction, a biting commentary on the Jewish experience of oppression. Years later the Book of Daniel spoke to the early Christians during the centuries of persecution by the Roman state. They too suffered oppression for their faith in God, for their refusal to collude with idolatry, for their scepticism about the might, this time of Rome which is called in Revelation 'Babylon the Great' Revelation borrows some of the imagery of Daniel, though it sadly lacks its humour. But in the reading from Revelation we had this evening we see the early Christian martyrs in heaven. They have come through the great ordeal of state organised torture and death to worship before the throne of God and the Lamb.

Christianity brought into the world the model and memory of a humble Lord. Jesus was not a strong man, but a Lamb Lion – strong through his meekness and suffering. Jesus Christ brought something genuinely new into the hierarchical world of the Roman empire. His resurrection demonstrated that human beings are not the playthings of the powerful but are endowed with a dignity that comes from God. Pushing them about as strong men tend to do is self-defeating. The strong man who rules without God and without respect for the image of God in humanity brings about his own downfall.

Of course there have been plenty of strong men in the Christian era. But Christianity has made possible a moral challenge to the rule of the strong, which has never been forgotten and still has power to change history. It would have been inconceivable before the Christian era for monks to call emperors to repentance or for kings to do penance in sackcloth and ashes. Jesus Christ has introduced scepticism into the world of power. Jesus insisted that greatness is shown not by dominating others but by serving them and setting them free.

We are going through a period in world history in which the idea of the strong man has become very attractive once again. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, China, North Korea, Russia, are now fairly permanently ruled by strongmen, and they are popular in true democracies as well, in Hungary and now, most recently, Brazil. I am not going to talk about President Trump because the American constitution does at least only allow presidents to serve two terms, but it would be fair to say that he manifests something of the archetype of the strongman. Alongside his obvious relishing of personal power is the touchiness and vulnerability which some strong men manifest. It is the Nebuchadnezzar syndrome. All bluster, but actually quite vain and weak.

There are four ways in which the Bible contrasts divine power with worldly power.

First it tells us first that human history is not just a succession of powerful rulers but the backdrop to God's interaction with the whole human race and with every human soul. Something more important is going on than dates and battles and economics.

Second the Bible insists that our moral horizon is not determined by the superiority of this or that ideology: the only horizon which matters is what scripture calls *The Kingdom of God*. And that kingdom is elusive, always present, but not complete, emerging but not final. We pray for it to come every day in the Lord's Prayer.

Third because it suggests that the best rulers are often those who are unwilling to rule, or who feel themselves to be unqualified; those in other words who know they are accountable and look for help from God.

And fourth because it insists that all ideologies are relative and revisable whether of the left or right. There is a place for political vision but it is second place. Seek ye first the kingdom of God.

That seeking, that prioritising, that vision of a kingdom not of this world is what scripture points us to at this time of the ending of the Church's year.