

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-18

Reign of Christ Sunday

November 21, 2021

Do you remember *The Da Vinci Code*? 2007 was an interesting year to enter ministry, because the film version of Dan Brown's 2003 novel had just made the Bible interesting again. The Bible was a puzzle that concealed a conspiracy filled with sex and violence. Mary was not only Jesus' wife; she was the Holy Grail whose offspring bore Jesus' blood. All of Christian history was a struggle, led by the Catholic Church, to conceal this secret, but historical figures like Leonardo Da Vinci had left a trail of secret clues for the clever to find.

It is tempting to treat apocalyptic visions like those in Daniel or Revelation in the same way: like a puzzle. Daniel dreams of four beasts arising from the primordial and chaotic sea. Who and what do these grotesque beasts represent? Does the dream predict the victorious return of Christ and if so, does it contain hints about dates and places?

The dream belongs to Daniel, an educated Jew exiled to Babylon and pressed into service in its royal court. The first six chapters of the book describe the efforts of Jews like Daniel and his friends to remain faithful to God in a foreign land. Their faith, their discipline, and the favour of God help them to prosper, but their faithfulness to God and to Jewish worship and dietary practices also gets them in trouble. You'll recall the stories

of Daniel falling afoul of imperial politics and surviving both the fiery furnace and the lions' den.

But in chapter seven, in the first person, Daniel begins to recount symbolic dreams. The dreams are likewise references to imperial politics. More specifically, the beasts are various empires that successively dominated the region with oppressive military force. The first beast, the winged lion, was a common feature of Babylonian art and thus ancient scholars believed it represents Babylon. The second beast, the bear with ribs in its jaws, is the Medean empire; the four-winged, four-headed leopard, the Persian empire that rapidly conquered in all four directions.¹

Who and what is the fourth beast, with iron teeth and terrible hooves? Ancient readers believed it was the Seleucid dynasty: the successors to Alexander the Great. This beast has ten horns; an eleventh horn uproots three other horns to make room for itself and has eyes, and a mouth which speaks arrogant blasphemies. This horn must then be Antiochus IV, who in the second century BC claimed to be a god and outlawed the Torah and the practice of Judaism. The dream is, then, a commentary on the terrible persecution faced by the book's first readers. Their oppressors are so dangerous that Jews are tempted to become terrified and passive, not daring to hope for a better future.

¹ Notes, *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, Revised. Edited by Harold W. Attridge, et al (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 1182-1184.

But as the Seleucids in turn gave way to the Roman empire, later readers both Jewish and Christian considered the puzzle and declared that the rampaging fourth beast was in fact Rome, the greatest and most terrible empire the world had ever known. Who or what are the ten horns, then? Probably they become various Roman and later villains as the reader chooses. To English Protestants the eleventh horn was the Catholic Bonnie Prince Charlie; some have suggested Adolf Hitler.²

In 1925, Pope Pius XI declared the last Sunday before Advent as Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday. Christ was king; Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, or any other local strongman was not. The eleventh horn was fascism and nationalism.

On Reign of Christ Sunday we are called to answer this question for ourselves. Who are the people or systems that would claim our allegiance? Who are the people or systems that seem so powerful, that would keep us fearful and thus hopeless and passive?

After the Heat Dome and now the floods, we might name Climate Change and the power of Nature seemingly run amok. The Lower Mainland is cut off from the rest of the country; friends and relatives are displaced; farmers have lost barns worth of animals. Fearful people create a minor crisis by swarming grocery stores and hoarding supplies.

² "Daniel 7:1-8, Four Beasts from the Sea," *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, Revised, edited by James L. Mays, et al (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 629-630.

The verdict in the Kyle Rittenhouse trial has once again highlighted issues of violence, racism, law enforcement and gun control that plague and divide not only our American neighbours but Canadians as well.

Whether the issue is hoarding or racism and gun violence, the underlying emotion is fear. Fear leads to hatred, to withdrawal, to thinking of yourself first and only. The issues seem overwhelming, like powerful beasts, and we feel helpless to act with faith and integrity.

In the face of our fear, God acts. As the fourth beast rampages, Daniel sees thrones set up, and a divine judge and jury take their place. This passage gives us one of the Bible's very few images of God in a human form: an elder, with flowing white hair and beard and white robes. A judge. He consults the rule books, pronounces judgment on the beasts, and takes away their power.

The message is clear: despite the power of the beasts, despite all appearances, the power of God is at work in the background. It is no less real and inevitable for being subtle and invisible. God will act, the power of the raging animalistic powers will be broken, and God – who exemplifies a human concern and compassion for regular beings – will establish a reign of justice.

But when will this happen?

In embracing our inner Robert Langdon, we need to be careful not to be too literal or dogmatic in assigning our problems to Daniel's symbolic beasts and horns. Daniel was a second-century Jew, writing to other second-century Jews. If Daniel's divinely-inspired, second-century vision refers originally and only to Rome, or to Hitler, what does that say about the intervening centuries? If the message of Daniel is "God will act, eventually, many centuries into the future," what does that say to its second-century readers about the nature, power, and compassion of God? It says that God is not able, or compassionate enough, to deal with today's problems. The good news inherent in this text vanishes.³

No, let Daniel speak first to his own time and place, for in his vision of 2nd-century problems, God is enacting a 2nd-century solution. Once the beasts are vanquished, a new kingdom is established and a new ruler appointed: one like a Son of Man, which in Hebrew poetry simply means, "one like a human being." This is a collective human figure: "the holy ones of [God,]" says verse 18, who will receive the kingdom forever and ever. The faithful people of God will have their own agency, no longer subject to foreign rulers who act like hungry beasts. Even as the fourth beast - even as the arrogant king Antiochus rules and persecutes and blasphemes - the power of God is at work to empower faithful Jews.

³ *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary.*

Subsequent centuries and Jewish and Christian traditions have speculated about this figure, this Son of Man, but it is primarily used of Jesus Christ. As a title of Jesus, it stresses the *humanity* of God's agent. Jesus is one like us.

Let us, then, seize the promise and responsibility inherent in Jesus Christ. Let us have the confidence to remove fear and the systems it empowers from the place of privilege. Let us dismantle fascism and nationalism and militarism and unfettered capitalism and their power to do harm. And in their place, let us not empower our own -isms, our own beasts. Let me not place my own dogmas in their place, but be careful always to place *human beings* at the centre. Let me consider, every day, whether I am pursuing the interest of my neighbour or simply my own convictions.

For the secret of the Bible is no secret at all: God loves human beings, especially those being trampled underfoot by those we call kings.