Epiphany 4

It is unusual to be confronted on a Sunday morning with a reading from the Revelation of St John of Patmos. Indeed, reading this book, a lurid, nightmarish and terrifying prophesy of the end times, may well be medically off-limits for those people of a sensitive disposition. As a university lecturer in nutrition, I used to use the book of Revelation as an illustration of what one might be thinking after not eating for 3 weeks. I have now engaged with it rather reluctantly, compelled by the lectionary’s challenge.

Encouraged by the Divine Epiphanies series, I’m asking you to come - in a virtual sense - with me to Angers, in the Loire valley. To see their magnificent tapestry of Revelation from the 1370s, displayed in the chateau. At 144 metres long and 6 metres high it is colossal. (It dwarfs the Bayeaux tapestry [la Tapisserie de la Reine Mathilde] an embroidery, now rather flimsy, of the defeat of the English, which may be visiting us in the UK at some point.)

The 71 huge panels of the Angers Apocalypse tapestry (originally 90) depict the narrative of events in Revelation, woven with great gusto. On the left of every panel, John is seen in a little kiosk, like the Dean’s stall or a Gothic phone box, peering out and writing it all down. The many-headed dragons, strange animals and big battles are there. John does not emerge from his shelter until the final chapter, and who can blame him! What is clear from Revelation is that terrible and powerful things happen, and are real. The fight for good over evil still fascinates us, even through fantasy literature and films from James Bond to our friend Harry Potter. The evils of famine, pestilence, war and death are still vividly real now. **Our struggles for world peace, to control dangerous epidemics, to feed the world, to delay death** are not going as well as we may have hoped and we are now more aware
than ever that our world, God's world, is vulnerable. Technology, big business, travel, communications and medicine have all helped and hindered us with this.

The last 2 chapters of Revelation tell of the glorious resolution of the fight of virtue against evil, by God, his son Jesus and His angels, and are very beautiful. The lovely modern church anthem composed by Bainton 'And I saw a new heaven' is the opening passage of the penultimate chapter, ch 21. Gentlemen of the choir, I expect that you know this one? This passage is now popular at funerals.

I now invite you come right back to Oxford, to look over there at the largest window in this wonderful cathedral, the Michael window, shaded a little by our scaffolding. Immediately following our Revelation passage is the war in heaven where Michael and his angels defeat the dragon and his angels. The scriptures tells us that 'The great dragon is the devil or Satan who leads the world astray'. Here we see the battle, with the dragon 'hurled to earth', fairly hard to see under the feet of the victorious Michael the archangel and his angels; the power of God is made explicit. This is what this stained glass window is here to show.

Now in the gospel of Mark, we see Jesus, just having called his disciples, teaching with amazing authority in a village synagogue. He wasn't a recognised teacher, such as a priest or scribe, who would traditionally justify every statement by quoting from the prophets or rabbis, but he was recognised as having compelling authority. Not only this, but he confronted and defeated the powers of evil in a place of worship - and on the Sabbath! The dark spirits recognised Jesus and shrieked out in terror! "We know who you are - the holy one of God!" The man himself was not evil - he was healed. We can see that Jesus had authority over demons. He was stern with them and they obeyed him. His authority and his healings went on to attract great popularity and to draw huge crowds. These events in the synagogue were clearly chosen by Mark for the beginning of his Gospel as a declaration that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. And we acknowledge this in our faith, in the Creed and in our lives.

Talk of the devil, as we have been told by our sub dean, is best kept wary and sparing. In my church tradition, mention is extremely rare. But the devil is the
negation of the goodness which is God's will: on occasion we need to engage with this concept, as a reminder that the direction of our faith is towards hope and love, and all the things that the devil is not.

Today, it may be a temptation for us to smugly regard our individual, relatively comfortable lives as completely protected by God, as if he were our own pocket mascot, but we must be aware that all is not yet right in the world, so we are obliged to listen to God's voice. How do we recognise it? We recognise it through the test of scripture (which is the Word) by tradition (which is the Way) and the judgement of experience and reason, guided by the Holy Spirit.

On a more basic level, can we recognise God doing something in the world? Wonderful charities, caring professions, even educational institutions, and therapeutic communities owe much to people guided to do God's work. Even right down to a personal level, in my work as a hospital chaplain I often find that I arrive at a bedside or meet a relative of a patient at exactly the right moment for them, and they are flabbergasted. My colleague Graham Sykes and I call these 'God moments'.

We as individuals, communities and the church need to recognise the deep troubles of the world. It is clear that the church should speak and act with confident authority to unleash God's saving power. The world has been claimed by the loving authority of Christ, so we must make our choices and plans guided by a spirit of affirmation, sincerity, solidarity, warmth, hope and love.

Amen