16 September 2018: Choral Matins
The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity
Psalm 110, Isaiah 44: 24 – 45: 8, Revelation 12: 1–12
The Revd Canon Dr Edmund Newey, Sub Dean

‘The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him’.

In nomine…

One of the great teaching documents that has come down to us from the early days of the Church is the series of catechetical orations by Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem in the fourth century. These are the lectures given by Cyril to those he was preparing for baptism. They are bursting with vivid images of a faith that was of all-consuming, life-changing significance to those being initiated into it. As Bill Shankly said of football, but should have said of Christianity: ‘It isn’t a matter of life and death. I can assure you it’s far more important than that’! Here is Saint Cyril on the sacrament of baptism:

Great is the Baptism that lies before you: a ransom to captives; a remission of offences; a death of sin; a new birth of the soul… But there is a serpent by the wayside watching those who pass by: beware lest he bite you with unbelief. He sees so many receiving salvation, and is seeking whom he may devour. You are coming in unto the Father of Spirits, but you are going past that serpent’ (cited in Joseph Mangina, Revelation, p.147).

How many serpents did you pass on your way to Christ Church this morning? None literally, I suspect – the county’s few remaining adders are no doubt all on the cusp of hibernation in mid-September. But, having heard those twelve verses of the Revelation to Saint John as our second lesson this morning, we’re not in the realm of the literal but of the figurative, the metaphorical. The serpents that Cyril refers to are one with ‘the great dragon…that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan’ of Revelation. ‘That ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan’ - looking out from here, I see him clearly before me now, set out in the great window of our North Transept with all the detail and colour that Clayton and Bell could muster. We rightly call it the St Michael
window, but a large part of its power to capture our attention lies not in the light of the haloed saints and angels, but in the dark muscularity of the serpent’s body. The deep red armour of the dragon’s scales twines and loops through the whole window, a compelling image of the sway of evil that leaves none of us untouched. Coming to church this morning we are indeed ‘coming in unto the Father of the Spirits’, but as we do so we pass very closely by that serpent: none of us is immune to his enticements.

Our position *vis-à-vis* the St Michael Window is not unlike the perspective we’re looking from as we hear the twelfth chapter of the book of Revelation. We stand below, looking up with Saint John at a great screen on which a heavenly drama is being enacted. What we see projected on the screen is, on one level, completely alien and bizarre: events and creatures who seem to have nothing to do with our daily lives. But at another level what is represented there could scarcely be more immediate and germane: it goes right to the core of who we are and who we ought to be as human beings.

This morning’s second lesson began by setting before us two great antagonists: first a woman, clothed in splendour and yet crying out in the agony of her labour pains; and secondly the monstrous multi-headed dragon. Who are these antagonists and what do they represent?

First, the more straightforward of the two: the dragon: he is, of course, a figure for Satan. red because this is the colour of blood and of warfare… seven-headed because he is evil to the maximum degree and because evil is essentially pluriform: ‘My name is Legion, for we are many’ [as the possessed man says to Jesus in Mark’s gospel]. He wears a crown because he has pretensions at kingship and because he is indeed the leader of an army. Finally, he is represented as a dragon… because he is a cosmic being, a creature from the dawn of time, the *ancient serpent* (Mangina, p.148).

This panoply of metaphors shows us the endless resourcefulness of the guises assumed by evil. As Joseph Mangina writes in his wonderful commentary on Revelation:

> Both God and the devil outrun our ability to depict them, although for opposite reasons. God is too real for our minds to encompass, while the devil is an ontological negative, always hovering at the border of unreality, though his effects in our world are real enough (p.148).

God and the devil alike are beyond depiction: not because they are equal and opposite, but because God is supremely real: more real than we are, the source of all being; and
because the devil is supremely unreal, having purchase over us only by the compulsive multiplicity of the lies he spins.

Set against the dragon is another equally compelling image: that of ‘a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars’. The woman can be interpreted in many ways, but the key point is one drawn out by the Swiss Reformer, Heinrich Bullinger, in his commentary:

This woman is clothed with the sun [because] scripture calleth Christ the sun of righteousness, and light of life. Saint Paul commandeth the Church to put on Christ…by Christ is covered the nakedness of the Church: Christ is the ornament and beauty of the church, through him it shineth in the world (cited in Mangina, p.149).

The woman, then, is a metaphor for the Church clothed in the light of Christ, but she is also Israel, Zion, Jerusalem, the whole creation groaning in apocalyptic agony. It may seem strange that the woman can be an image of the Church when she brings forth the child who is Christ. Surely Christ gives birth to the Church, not the Church to Christ. But the point is made clear in a later verse than those we heard this morning, which speaks of ‘the rest of [the woman’s] offspring, those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus’ (Revelation 12:17). Christ, in other words, lives in and through those who have faith in him: Christ gives birth to the Church, which in turn gives birth to him ever anew in the lives of those touched and transformed by his resurrection.

But the woman clothed with the sun is also an image of humanity in all our innate dignity and nobility, with all our inherent fragility and vulnerability; travelling, in Cyril of Jerusalem’s words on the path to the new birth of our souls, but always beset by the serpent lurking at the wayside.

Maximus the Confessor speaks of humanity as the boundary or frontier, between the physical and the spiritual realms; the priesthood of creation that unites earth and heaven. This is a wonderfully positive account of our status as human beings, but it requires us also to acknowledge that in the fall of humankind all of creation was dragged down by our sin too. Our collective turning away from that calling to be priests of creation infects not us alone but the whole cosmos too, a realisation perhaps easier to accept in the light of the current environmental plight. The devil, that ancient serpent, has coiled his way not just into our minds and hearts, but through them into every aspect of created being.
That is the bad news, evoked with unparalleled power in the Revelation to Saint John. But the good news is there in those pages and with even greater majesty.

As Mangina writes:

The devil is the original bearer of false witness. His lies are legion, like his multiple personalities. They include all the stratagems of deception and doublespeak by which the vast enterprises of technocracy seek to keep people from knowledge of the truth (p.154). But the truth remains that Christ holds all the true power; evil’s purchase on us is entirely delusory. Our task, then, under the protection of Christ and the guidance of the Spirit, is to let ourselves be trained to attend to the truth. That sort of attention is difficult and demanding. As Simone Weil wrote:

Something in our soul has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue. This something is much more closely connected with evil than is the flesh. That is why every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves (‘Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God’ in Panichas (ed.), The Simone Weil Reader, p.49).

And we encounter that sort of attention supremely in Christ who shows us how God himself relates to ‘sin, suffering, evil, and death by a relentless and miraculous enmity’: sin he forgives, suffering he heals, evil he casts out, and death he conquers’ (David Bentley Hart, The Doors of the Sea, p.87). By him, in him and with him, may we do so too.

In nomine…