

LP

Readers' Service

"Slaying the Dragon"

by

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THE PREPARATION

A CALL TO WORSHIP

"I looked and saw a vast throng, which no one could count, from all races and tribes, nations and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were robed in white and had palm branches in their hands, and they shouted aloud: *"Victory to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*

And all the angels who stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures prostrated themselves before the throne and worshipped God, crying: *"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honour, power and might, be to our God for ever! Amen!"*

Let us join our praise with the praises of heaven as we sing the Hymn numbered 810 (HAP)

HYMN 810: *"Come, let us join our cheerful songs with angels round the throne."*

THREE PRAYERS

A PRAYER OF ADORING AFFIRMATION

Let us pray:

Eternal God, creator of all, your greatness and majesty far exceeds our capacity to imagine what you are like. Yet, we believe you are a God who cares, because you chose to reveal your nature and your ways in the history of particular people in particular circumstances and places. In our imperfect finite way we adore you.

Lord Jesus Christ, the Word spoken at creation, born as man among men that through your life and death we may see the very nature of God. As brothers and sisters who share your way, we adore you.

Holy Spirit, hovering over the face of the deep and bringing order out of chaos, whose presence we experience as you move amongst us to unite us in love and goodness. In the fellowship of your people, we adore you.

Glory to God, our holy creator, our loving redeemer and our powerful enabler. Amen.

A PRAYER OF PENITENCE

Holy God, the world you made so wonderfully has become for us all a place where darkness and dread is experienced. By half-hearted commitment to the truth that has shone forth in Jesus Christ and, by our refusals to forgive and live at peace with one another, we have contributed to feelings of hopelessness. Forgive us the fear that clings so hard to what seems to be safe; for the selfishness that turns its head and heart from those who evoke and need compassion; for our words that can be so fickle in promise and so hurtful in relationships.

Forgive us, O God our creator and redeemer, and enable us by the Spirit to become new and faithful men and women, for your love's sake. Amen..

A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

We thank you for the joy of being here today, where we can be assured that you are still our God; where, in spite of all that we have done and come through, you still address us as your children.

We thank you for those who have witnessed to us of your loving kindness and who take their place among your saints and martyrs. We thank you for those who minister your blessings to us, especially those who hold office in this church and circuit. We thank you that your blessings always come to us as grace in the present and promise for the future. In faith and trust we thank you now for love and hope, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We now join together in the Lord's Prayer, saying, "Our Father ..."
THE LORD'S PRAYER

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Let us sing the hymn numbered 469 (HAP)

HYMN 469: *"Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire let us thine influence prove."*

THE OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah chapter 51 verses 4 to 11.

In the first five verses the prophet is speaking on behalf of God and seeking to renew the faith and hope of those who are exiles with him in Babylon. In the final three verses the prophet turns to God on behalf of the exiles and cries out, asking God to wake up and exert his strength on behalf of his people.

THE EPISTLE

The Book of Revelation chapter 12 verse 1 to chapter 13 verse 1.

This difficult passage, though not unlike some of the cartoon films we see on our television sets, is full of images that need interpretation. The passage does not set out to depict the story of our Lord's birth and the evil ways of Herod, but is about the pain and anguish of the heavenly Spirit who brings forth One who is persecuted on earth before being snatched up into the presence of God. With the victory of love in the cross and resurrection, evil seeks to destroy all on earth who belong to that heavenly Spirit.

THE GOSPEL

Matthew chapter 24 verses 23 to 31

Matthew records an aspect of our Lord's teaching that many of us find difficult to comprehend. Jesus wants his followers to understand, that whilst they may think of him as the one who has conquered sin and evil, they must not be so foolish as to imagine that sin and evil have been eradicated. Rather, these powers will continue to operate - but not for ever!

Let us sing the Hymn numbered 688

HYMN 688: *"Who would true valour see, let him come hither."*

THE SERMON

"SLAYING THE DRAGON"

Introduction

Amazing! An intelligent adult congregation in the late twentieth century singing about "giants, hobgoblins and foul fiends"! What on earth were you thinking of - the world of make-believe?

We all know stories that begin with the words "Once upon a time". Such stories invariably invite us to escape from the real world, into a world of make-believe. Another world that reflects the world we know because it usually includes struggles, disasters or tragedies. But a make-believe world because the difficulties and problems are always happily resolved. Not a real world but one in which we can expect the hero and heroine to come through their hardships, ultimately to stroll hand-in-hand towards the sunset and a place where they will live "happy ever after." Happy stories with a happy endings because goodness triumphs over wickedness, or right puts evil in its place. If only life was really like that!

I.

Did you know that the prophet Isaiah fell back upon such a story when things were seemingly hopeless for him and his people? He called upon God to slay the dragon, just as God slew the dragon Rahab in the story everyone knew about creation.

If we were telling the story that Isaiah alluded to, the one about God and the dragon Rahab, then it would have to begin with that special opening phrase, "once upon a time." That way we'd know it wasn't going to be history in the strict sense of the word and that it would have a happy ending. In short, the story might have been told like this: "Once upon a time, when God decided to create a universe, God had to deal with Rahab the dragon. Rahab was a monster who thrived only in the midst of chaos and confusion. Therefore a great struggle took place in space. As you would expect, Rahab was defeated. But with his defeat God was faced with another problem: What to do with the monster? Believe it or not, but out of Rahab's body God fashioned the world and thus brought order to enclose chaos, life from death and good out of evil."

A nonsense story you may think. But one which ancient peoples told to explain why, in the human experience, evil erupts and breaks through the veneer of this world's life. Like molten lava seeking a weak spot at which to spew out death destruction and chaos in a volcanic eruption, so, they believed chaos lurked beneath the surface of all things. No one wants plague or famine or war or violence, yet, inexplicably, people often found themselves caught up in such horrors.

Gardeners know what the story of Rahab is all about. The moment they turn their back on a well weeded patch, new weeds spring up from nowhere. If ever you think you've got the weeds under control you're only kidding yourself! Little is gained from asking, "where do the weeds come from or how do they get there?" Gardeners understand that weeds are a part of the nature of things.

Isaiah lived at a time when chaos was rampant. He and his people knew fear and despondency. On their behalf he cried out to God and asked God to wake up and act. Whilst chaos may have been defeated and imprisoned at creation, it could still break loose. The battle with Rahab had yet to be concluded for Rahab had become part of the nature of things. So, because the prophet believed God cared for his people Israel, the prophet pleads for a divine intervention that will deal with circumstances that are way beyond the control of human ability.

Our immediate temptation is to think of Isaiah as a prophet calling for the moon - encouraging his people to trust in a God of superstition or myth or fairy tale. But if that is all the prophet was doing then why have Jews and Christians regarded his writings with such high regard? Is there more to this than meets the eye?

2.

Imagine yourself among the thousands of men women and children who found themselves on the border of Zaire in the latter part of 1996. Their world had fallen apart and was ripping itself to destruction. There was pain, illness, sorrow, grief, despair and hopelessness. International Aid Agencies had given up and left them to their own fate, deeming the situation as too dangerous in which to minister. Wringing their hands in despair, many would ask "Why?" "How did we get caught up in it all?" "What did we do that such terrible things should be happening to us?" "Where can we go?" "How many must die before life and order can be restored?"

It was not altogether unlike that in Isaiah's situation. A Babylonian invasion of Palestine had resulted in half the population being taken into exile. A complete breakdown in confidence meant that life had become a matter of everyone for himself or herself. No one trusted anyone else. On top of that there had been both an earthquake and a flood. In Palestine there was famine, dysentery, cholera, and a total feeling of hoplessness and bewilderment. Just about everything that had given life shape and purpose had disappeared. Families were separated; there was no employment; towns, villages and Jerusalem were in ruins; people scratched for survival where they could. The people God had called "his own" and to whom he'd given the land of Palestine appeared to be lost or finished.

In such circumstances people not only cry "Why?" but pray for help and clutch at straws. We would likely classify the story of Rahab's defeat as fiction and it is most unlikely that we would choose to use that or any similar story as Isaiah did. But we know that when men and women are driven to the edge of despair they turn to God and, whatever may be their picture of God, they plead with him to do something - because the horror is too big and the situation is beyond their control.

Yet, the reason why Isaiah brought the story of Rahab into 'his' prayer was because it expressed something about the nature of God that the prophet believed both he and his people needed to hold in the forefront of their minds. Their God was not One who set things in motion and then stepped back or turned away. God had moved to free Israel from the chaos of slavery in Egypt. God was as active in the midst of chaos as one could hope to experience God's presence in moments of great peace and order. To believe in Israel's God is to believe that God will not avoid chaos and, in spite of the way in which evil can unexpectedly rise up and overtake individuals or a nation, it is possible therefore to believe that God will establish a rule of law and order on earth as such a rule must prevail in his heaven.

So, when Isaiah cried out, he was inviting those on whose behalf he cried to put their faith in the God of their fathers. To believe that however real may be their experience in confronting the giants of despair, the ogres of famine and the dragons of deceit, these are defeated powers and God is there with them in the struggle.

3.

As a prophet, Isaiah continued to speak about faith in God and the need for people to believe and act as though God had already triumphed over evil. If the record is true, then his contemporaries

called him a fool and accused him of building castles in the air or of being out of touch with reality. No wonder he said that whoever trusted God to be more real than anything or anyone else would be despised and be rejected by his contemporaries.

But faith in the God who has defeated the powers of evil shines even more clearly in the New Testament. Those who turn to the Book of Revelation discover that John of Patmos, like Isaiah before him, drew upon the ancient stories and depicted evil in bestial form. If for John the beast was as real as the Roman Empire he maintained it could have no lasting place on earth any more than it could occupy a place in heaven. Of course it is all a matter of faith and hope.

Unfortunately, when the world is most aware of its inability to establish justice and the rule of law, it often acts like those who came out from Jerusalem to cast a sympathy vote for John the Baptist. Because he thought God's intervention was immanent, he called upon people to have faith in God. "Be sure you're on the winning side! Repent and be prepared!" John the Baptist believed God had called Jesus to be the Messiah and, with God's approval and power, he pictured Jesus bringing justice down as an axe is driven into a rotten tree.

But it didn't happen as John the Baptist had hoped. Evil played havoc with the ministry of Jesus and made him appear a weak and ineffective person, unable to save himself when the chips were down. It couldn't have happened as John the Baptist hoped, for the simple reason that Jesus refused to fight evil on evil's ground or in evil's way.

In short, Jesus invited people to join with him in trusting God and believing that God would have the last word. Not fighting the battle for God, or believing "we" can overthrow injustice any more than put a lid on an active volcano or check the tremor of an earthquake. Jesus worked with the idea that God is capable of fighting his own battles and bringing his own justice to bear on each and every situation. Naturally, this led some to regard Jesus as a fool who refused to politicise the kingdom of heaven. He too was despised, rejected and associated with grief and disappointment.

But surprise, surprise! The crucified carpenter of Nazareth was raised from the dead. The one event above all others that transformed the lives of those who followed Jesus. For the disciples found through the risen Christ a new faith to cope with all life's vicissitudes - the ability to face persecution, chaos and death in the assurance that God's power over evil is the ultimate reality. God will and, therefore, does give meaning to lives that have lost all meaning and purpose. No wonder John of Patmos wrote his book to give encouragement to the Christian martyrs of his day, for in life and by death they brought God's future into the present through faith in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion

Chaos, and all the awful things we associate with a breakdown in the rule of law and order, is not eternal. Faith affirms that, in the ultimate analysis, the powers that dehumanise life have no lasting victory. Faith demands that we bear all things, hope all things, and endure all things, in the confidence that he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead is on the side of all who follow him with love, loyalty and integrity. Such is the faith of the People of God and, in their company, God confirms such faith through the work of the Spirit. By such faith the past and the future are brought into the present and God is seen as the One "who was, who is and is to come," the everlasting Father.

We sing the Hymn numbered 491

HYMN 491: *"New songs of celebration render to him who has great wonders done."*

CHURCH ANNOUNCEMENTS AND OFFERING

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we know you suffer in your people's anguish and delight in their joy; we also know you as the One who brings order out of chaos, light into darkness and life from death. We pray, as your people, that, in times of adversity as in times of delight, your Spirit will confirm in us your abiding presence. We pray that, whatever the cost, the sure and certain hope of your eternal purpose will nerve us to follow in the way of Christ; that hoping all things we shall endure all things.

Made ready for every risk and sacrifice, grant us the determination of will and heart to see your justice done and your mercy triumphant in both the life of the church and of the world.

We pray for all who lack opportunities to grow in body mind or spirit - those addicted to drugs - the physically and mentally disabled - the politically and socially oppressed: Let them feel your presence and experience your hope in the commitment, compassion and self-sacrifice of those whom you have named to serve your purpose. In silence [or by name] we commend to God those we know to God.

We pray for those whose response to God has involved them in difficulty or danger: Those whose service to others involves serious health risks - those who face the danger of being caught-up in situations of political tension or violence - those who day by day minister to the dying and the sorrowing - those who give up their own security to be all things to all people.

You choose, O God, to achieve your purpose through the faithfulness of your servants. We are amazed that you have such faith in mortal men and women. We are not sure WE can shoulder the burden of such a trust and, therefore, we pray you to deal with our sense of inadequacy and fear by deepening our awareness of your all-sufficient love. Inspire us to look back into the past and to see how, by those who love and honour your name, you have brought deliverance from evil and accomplished recovery and reassurance to those you love. Then lift up our heads, fill our hearts and strengthen our bodies, that we may press on toward the goal of your high calling; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The final Hymn is number 86.

Submission to the will of God can look onerous and joyless unless it is coupled to vision or hope. The Magnificat, or Mary's Song, doesn't dwell upon the difficulties she is about to face in carrying and raising Jesus. The duty and honour, the struggle, pain and sorrow, are all subservient to the hope they bring to the world. We are called to be at one with Mary in hope and, therefore, praise.

THE BLESSING

ORDER OF SERVICE

Call to Worship

HYMN 810

Prayers
The Lord's Prayer

HYMN 469

Old Testament Lesson

The Epistle

The Gospel

HYMN 688

The Sermon

HYMN 491

Announcements
Offering

Prayers of Intercession

HYMN 86

The Blessing