

GSM 24/11/12

Revelation 12

I'd like to show you a TV commercial from 2004.

[show clip of <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tus8s2mKGME>]

I hope that hasn't shocked you too much – I would imagine that none of us has actually been to a nativity play involving actual midwives and anaesthetists. The reason I'm showing it to you is that this morning we're going to look at an alternative nativity story. We're doing a mini-series on passages in the Bible outside the gospels dealing with the nativity and you don't get much more alternative than this morning. Ben said last week how some of the passages we are looking at might find their way into the 9 lessons and carols traditional to Christmas. I guarantee that you won't hear this morning's passage at any of the Christmas services you attend next month. In many ways it's the sister passage to what Ben preached on last week from Genesis 3 – but this time rather than being in the first book in the Bible, it's in the last. Please turn to Revelation chapter 12 and Darren is going to come to read it.

[read]

I guess in coming weeks you'll receive cards with this sort of image on it:



According to this passage a more appropriate picture might be something like this:



But I don't suppose that Clinton Cards stock too many like that. The fact is that whilst much imagery around Christmas can feel rather like having 17 sugars in your tea, this morning's passage is rather like a full-on bitter Turkish coffee – something which is a shock to the system. It presents another truth around the nativity story – not a contradictory story to the usual nativity story, but a complementary one – one that sits alongside the shepherds and innkeeper and wise men and so on, and is another side of the same coin. It helps to explain what's going on. If all you experience at Christmas is 'Away in a Manger' and 'Silent Night', then you miss out on part at least of what's going on.

So let's try and explain it. Let's start with a who's who in this passage. The woman giving birth is not Mary, as in the gospel nativity, but symbolises the people of God. You get that from the sun, moon and stars reference in verse 1 – those of who you remember the story of Joseph in Genesis or are fans of the Technicolour Dreamcoat musical will remember one of Joseph's dreams involving the sun, moon and stars representing the twelve tribes of Israel, and the commentators all agree that that is what is represented here. The child is Jesus – you get that from the reference in verse 5 to ruling the nations with an iron sceptre, which harks back, for those of you taking notes, to Psalm 2 where the psalmist says of Jesus that he will rule the nations with an iron sceptre. The one character that you don't need explaining as to who it is is the dragon, because verse 9 explains it – “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray”. This is the same serpent that we encountered last week in Genesis 3 deceiving Adam and Eve into disobeying God.

So much for the characters. What lessons does this passage have for us? Well, it shows us the past, the future, and the present.

Let's look at the past first – after all, that's what all Christmas sermons do – look back to what happened 2000 years ago in Bethlehem. The woman – the people of Israel, remember – is in pain; do you see that from verse 2? The Old Testament teaches that the cry of the people of God was for a Messiah, someone to rescue them from the situation they were in, both when faced with physical enemies and more profoundly when faced with the consequences of their rebellion against God. We heard last week how Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, and how as a consequence they were under a sentence of death. From that point the story of the Old Testament is of God revealing his desire to commit to his people as their God but they are not able to meet his standards – they take on the consequences of Adam and Eve's rebellion and face the sentence of death just as they did. The people are in pain, and here it is likened to labour pains. And a child is born. But there is a problem – a dragon, opposed to the child, is waiting to devour it.

Now, let's stop there. The standard Christmas story doesn't have any baddies apart from Herod. Why this talk about dragons waiting to eat children? It's all a bit fairy-tale-ish isn't it? A bit bogey-man, telling stories about monsters to scare children into obedience. Well, doubtless lots of monster stories have that as their purpose. In ancient map-making, those making the maps would write "here be dragons" on areas of the map unexplored so far to scare sailors away from unknown dangers. But I think we're in different territory here. It's one of the central truths of the Christian faith that God is not the only supernatural being – there is an evil spiritual being as well as a good spiritual being. There is an evil force opposed to good, whose purpose is undermining God and his purposes and attacking mankind. Now, if this appears hocus pocus to you, then apologies – this is what we in the church believe. This is what the Bible teaches – you may believe that all evil in the world is down to bad men and women, but the Bible tells us that that is not the complete answer. And here, in our alternative nativity story, the enemy is active and predatory.

Back to the passage. You'll see from verse 5 that, when it comes to the story of Jesus's life, it's a bit truncated, to say the least. Verse 5, he's born. Verse 5, he's snatched up to the throne. Where's his teaching, his death, his resurrection? Instead, we go straight from

Bethlehem to the Ascension. Then what comes next in Revelation 12 is the angels, but it's a world away, isn't it, from kids in Year 2 at the school nativity dressed in white blankets and tinsel saying "peace on earth". Peace on earth maybe, but war in heaven. The devil is defeated and hurled down to earth. Down at earth he pursues the people of God, but is thwarted.

So, according to this morning's passage, that's what *has* happened. So much for the past. How about the future? Well, there's only a passing reference to it here in verse 12. Do you see where it says that Satan is "filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short"? What does it mean when it says that his time is short? We're not told directly in this passage so we have to look ahead further in Revelation, to chapter 20. This is what verse 10 of chapter 20 says: "the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever". The Bible teaches that the certain outcome for God's enemy, Satan, is that he is under a sentence of death, that the time will come when he is destroyed for ever and will no longer have any ability to interfere in human affairs.

That's what the future holds. But I want to spend most of this sermon talking about the present. What does it say to us about what life is like for the followers of Jesus today? Well, you'd be forgiven looking around in thinking that Christmas means that all of God's people are happy and contented, looking forward to a lovely family time and welcoming in the baby Jesus. I wonder if that's how everyone here is feeling today. If you are, fantastic, but I'm sure that for many inside this church and out, this coming Christmas season will be one of loneliness and worry – whether it's worrying about money, relationships, or whatever – and the required jollity and fun at this time of year can be tiresome at best and hateful at worst. There's a *sentimentality* around at this time of year that refuses to acknowledge hardship and difficulty. It can be very hard to process if you're not in a good place.

That's one of the reasons I was so keen to preach this morning from this passage. The Bible isn't sentimental when it talks about Jesus's birth in the gospels, and it certainly isn't sentimental when it talks about Jesus's birth here. What we have here is an insight into what

is happening in the spiritual realm and an explanation as to why things don't always go to plan for God's people. In this passage we see the present reality for the people of God and the way to deal with it. First, the present reality. What are the consequences of Satan being unable to destroy Jesus and being defeated in Heaven? Look with me at verse 12 of this morning's passage. "Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short." Verse 17: "Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus". A bit different from "Joy to the World", isn't it? In the Christmas story, the angels announced a message of joy to the shepherds on the hill, but here it is not joy but woe that is announced to the earth.

What we see is that the people of God have a powerful enemy, and that enemy is both bent on harming them and is filled with fury. This is a key spiritual truth – we do not live our lives in a spiritual vacuum, but we are in a spiritual fight with a spiritual enemy. And it's clear that that enemy is very powerful. Look with me at the description of Satan in verse 3 – he is described as having seven heads, ten horns and seven crowns. These are all signs of power and authority. Verse 4 says how he swept stars out of the sky with his tail. This is clearly a very powerful being, and not one to be underestimated. It's also clear that he has particular functions to play – in verse 9 he is described as leading the world astray and in verse 10 he is described as being the accuser of our brothers and sisters. So we see how this powerful being operates – he operates to deceive. We saw that from the story of the Garden of Eden which Ben preached on last week – Satan persuaded Eve that God's promises of death if man disobeyed God's commands were a lie. Adam and Eve disobeyed and found themselves under a sentence of death. And Satan also operates to accuse. He's the whisper in your ear that says "Call yourself a Christian? You know that God can never forgive you for that thing you've done. You may as well give up – after all, you're never going to make the grade".

Not only does Satan have these objectives in mind, but it's clear from verse 12 that he is particularly focussed on following them through because of his *fury*. His knowledge that he is doomed drives him on. There's a scene in the first Lord of the Rings when Gandalf is battling a huge demon in the dwarf kingdom and the demon falls into the abyss, but reaches

out with its whip and drags Gandalf down with it. It's the same picture here – Satan knows he is doomed and that knowledge drives him on to take as many of God's people down with him as he can. Sometimes in the church we may get complacent in dealing with the devil because we know that he is defeated, and so he is. But he is still active and his knowledge that he is defeated makes him more active in wanting to lash out. It says elsewhere in the New Testament that the devil is like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. He actively looks for opportunities to get after mankind and in particular Jesus's followers. It says here that he wages war against them.

What does it mean in verse 17 where it says that he wages war against the followers of Jesus? Well, that he deceives and accuses them – and more than anything his desire in doing so is for people who profess to follow Jesus to follow their own ways, or another way instead. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was tempted by the devil. When Satan tempted Jesus he offered him bread when hungry, a way to glory without having to go through death, and a chance to prove his importance. Satan used the things that he knew would be in the mind of Jesus. That's his pattern – he uses whatever he thinks will work to attack the people of God, whether it's offering us things we desperately need or want, an answer to our loneliness, a way out of dangerous situations, advancement, or certainty when only uncertainty exists. If only we would make a compromise here, or disobey God here. The devil also uses other tactics - he discourages the followers of Jesus in any way he can by putting difficulty and opposition in their way. In the book of Job Satan attacks Job with calamity and disease to discourage Job and persuade him to turn aside from his faith.

How can we overcome these attacks? The key is in verse 11 – we follow the example of the angels. “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death”. Now there's something very practical here. Satan was defeated by the blood of the Lamb – that is, the death of Jesus on the cross to pay the penalty for our rebellion against God. He was also defeated by the testimony of the angels, by their actions and words bearing witness to Jesus's rescue. What does it mean for us to defeat Satan by our testimony? It means the followers of Jesus not just saying they follow Jesus but putting their money where their mouth is – in following Jesus in

their actions. In following the pattern of the cross in sacrificing and suffering in order to reach glory.

I came across a particularly vivid example of following Jesus in deed as well as word in the story of a Masai man called Joseph. This is his story:-

One day Joseph, who was walking along one of these hot, dirty African roads, met someone who shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with him. Then and there he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. The power of the Spirit began transforming his life; he was filled with such excitement and joy that the first thing he wanted to do was return to his own village and share that same Good News with the members of his local tribe.

Joseph began going from door-to-door, telling everyone he met about the Cross of Jesus and the salvation it offered, expecting to see their faces light up the way his had. To his amazement the villagers not only didn't care, they became violent. The men of the village seized him and held him to the ground while the women beat him with strands of barbed wire. He was dragged from the village and left to die alone in the bush.

Joseph somehow managed to crawl to a water hole, and there, after days of passing in and out of consciousness, found the strength to get up. He wondered about the hostile reception he had received from people he had known all his life. He decided he must have left something out or told the story of Jesus incorrectly. After rehearsing the message he had first heard, he decided to go back and share his faith once more.

Joseph limped into the circle of huts and began to proclaim Jesus. "He died for you, so that you might find forgiveness and come to know the living God" he pleaded. Again he was grabbed by the men of the village and held while the women beat him reopening wounds that had just begun to heal. Once more they dragged him unconscious from the village and left him to die.

To have survived the first beating was truly remarkable. To live through the second was a miracle. Again, days later, Joseph awoke in the wilderness, bruised, scarred—and determined to go back.

He returned to the small village and this time, they attacked him before he had a chance to open his mouth. As they flogged him for the third and probably the last time, he again spoke to them of Jesus Christ, the Lord. Before he passed out, the last thing he saw was that the women who were beating him began to weep.

This time he awoke in his own bed. The ones who had so severely beaten him were now trying to save his life and nurse him back to health. The entire village had come to Christ.

Now, of course, that's a fairly unusual and extreme example – but the point is this. Joseph faced suffering and discouragement in his attempt to live out his faith by sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. He persisted and overcame the opposition by his willingness to suffer and tell the truth of Jesus. As it says in this morning's passage, he overcame the devil by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of his testimony; he did not love his life so much as to shrink from death.

But maybe the devil is more subtle with you. Maybe you won't face Kenyan villagers trying to kill you. Maybe you won't face physical threats against you at all – but just the prospect of having to pass up a chance for advancement at work, for a relationship with someone you've taken a shine to. Remember that Jesus in his temptation wasn't faced with physical violence – instead he was offered things it would have been wrong for him to take. The devil likes to deceive. Or maybe, the devil will whisper that you're not good enough. That's you're a fraud sitting in this church with that thing that only you know about. With that dirty secret, or those thoughts that you struggle to move from. How dare you, the devil says, think that you can come here and pretend that you're good enough.

Maybe that resonates with you. How do we deal with these attacks? By remembering the reason we're here at all in this place. We're not here because we're good – we're here because we recognise that we're not good enough. We're not here to do anything to improve our situation – our situation was improved once and for all on an execution site on a hill outside Jerusalem in around AD30 and in a tomb 3 days later. This passage shows us why we're here and in doing so shows us how to answer the doubts, the internal voice that accuses us. We're here because, although we have gone our own way and followed our own selfishness that takes us from God, Jesus came down as a perfect man to take our place in suffering the punishment for our rebellion, which was death and separation from God. So, if you follow Jesus, when God sees you he does not see your imperfection and rebellion, he

sees Jesus's perfection and obedience. That's the answer that beats the devil – we can say “you cannot accuse me of anything because God is faithful and just to forgive my wrongs and make me clean and perfect before him. He does so because I trust in what Jesus achieved for me on the cross and base my life around his death and his resurrection.” Against that, and the decision of Christians to let their lives reflect the truth of the gospel, the devil has no answer.

So this Christmas, listen to the stories of the shepherds and the angels. It is a joyful time. God has come to us. He has visited us and proclaimed that there is a way for us to have peace with him. But bear a thought when you hear the Christmas stories of the other important aspect of Jesus's life. Think on the gift of myrrh from the Wise Men and how that gift, used for preparing the body for burial, points to the deeper truth of Christmas, that Jesus came so that we might defeat Satan just as he did. Jesus came to die, so that we might live.