

Lesson 6: Revelation 13

Opening Question: Who is one of the most patient people you know?

Opening Prayer: We long for the day of your return, Jesus. We long for every wrong thing to be undone. May we, your saints, have patient endurance and faithfulness as we await your return. Amen.

Read aloud Revelation 13:1-10

Here John is building on the images written about in Daniel 7. In that chapter, Daniel writes about beasts that arise out of the sea. The last beast is the worst. Knowing this, pick up Wright:

In Daniel 7, there are four monsters that come up out of the sea. They are, like so much in this kind of writing, the stuff of nightmares. The first is a winged lion. The second is a bear with three tusks in its mouth. The third is a leopard with four wings and four heads. Then comes the fourth beast, greater and more terrible, with iron teeth and bronze claws. It has ten horns, with a further little horn growing up beside them.

The interpretation is quite clear. These monsters represent four kingdoms, the fourth of which in particular will become a great and brutal world empire. The horns represent different kings, the last one of whom will make war against God's people and blaspheme God himself. Then comes the great reversal: 'the Ancient of Days' takes his seat for a court hearing, sitting in condemnation over the last great monster and destroying his power, giving it instead to the 'one like a son of man' who comes to be presented before the Ancient of Days and to receive an everlasting, universal sovereignty.

There is no question but that John has this passage of Daniel firmly in mind. No question, either, how he and many in his day were reading it. They are not interested in actual monsters, great Day-of-the-Triffids creatures crawling up out of the Mediterranean Sea to attack the holy land. They are interested in the earthly reality which these monsters represent. And in the first century the identification was not difficult. John's single monster has telescoped Daniel's four into one, part leopard, part bear, part lion, with ten horns and seven heads. The monster is Rome (115-116).

Here is where we remember that this book meant something to the people who originally read it. They would have understood the reference to Daniel 7, and they would have known that the first beast John was writing about was Rome.

Wright says:

But the central and important feature, which all his readers would have recognized at once, is that the monster claimed worship, and shared that worship with the dark pagan gods that stood behind it. A glance at Roman coins of the period tells its own story, as one emperor after another not only claimed to be 'son of god' but to dress up in the garb traditionally associated with this or that ancient pagan divinity. And of course, once the emperor becomes a god, there is no room for other gods. It's all right if local and tribal deities are still worshipped, so long as one worships the new god, Rome and the emperor. But if one refuses – as the Christians knew they were bound to refuse – then a collision course is set. Like Daniel and his friends in the early chapters of the book from which John drew so richly, all the world seemed to be worshipping the monster. Only the faithful few, here described in terms of their names being in the lamb's book of life, refuse to do so.

The last verse of this section may reflect John's sober realism when contemplating the scene he has now drawn. Some people are going to be taken captive. Others are going to be killed with the sword. That's just the way it is. The proper response is not to kick and scream, but to hold firm to patience and faith. Chapter 11 meant what it said. It is through the faithful witness unto death that the lamb wins the victory, that God's kingdom replaces the kingdom of the monster, that the dragon himself is to lose the last remains of his power. How this is to be worked out we have yet to see. But what John is doing at this point is sketching the larger, darker picture within which the little local struggles of the churches must be seen if they are to make sense, and if the challenge to uncompromising witness is to make sense. Only when we remember the dragon and the monster do we realize what a deadly serious thing Christian faith, patience and holiness really is (117-118).

Read aloud Revelation 13:11-18

Just as with the seven letters to the churches, there are contemporary references in Revelation 13 that address the lives of the people in these churches.

Read Wright aloud:

There were several tricks commonly employed to enable the statues of various gods to move about, to breathe, weep and even speak. Sophisticated pagan writers of the time mention many such devices, pouring scorn on their trickery. But people were taken in, and more and more people, through the work of the local 'monsters', came to worship the first monster itself. And, through that means, the dragon itself.

What's more, worshipping or not worshipping was quickly becoming the dividing line between people who were acceptable in the community and people who weren't. Not long after this time, some local officials introduced a formal requirement that unless

you had offered the required sacrifices you weren't allowed in the market. There were various kinds of marks and visible signs which were used to set people apart either as 'able to trade' or as 'not able to trade'. From quite early on the Christians were faced with a stark alternative: stay true to the lamb and risk losing your livelihood, the ability to sell or buy; or capitulate to the monster, sacrifice to Caesar at the behest of the local officials, and then everything will be all right – except your integrity as one of the lamb's followers.

We can understand the dilemma faced by those Christians back then. We like to think that we would always choose the reality and reject the parody, But would we? When we ask ourselves where similar key issues emerge and challenge us today, it may not be as clear-cut as we like to think - and it's quite possible that many Christians in the first century felt like that too. Does it count as a compromise if I use Caesar's coinage, even though it has words like 'son of god' stamped on it? Is it a compromise if I put my stall out by the side of the road during one of the great imperial festivals, to catch the crowds as they are going to the temple, even if I don't go myself? Will it matter if I buy a slab of beef in the market, even though I know it will have been offered in sacrifice in Caesar's temple just up the road? For us, does it matter if we buy a newspaper which openly mocks the Christian faith and promotes every other way of life imaginable except the Christian one – even if all I'm going to read is the sports news? Does it matter if I work for a company that, through one of its other offshoots, is cheerfully polluting lakes and rivers and destroying their wildlife? Should I be worried that my bank is a major investor in companies that work in parts of Latin America where labor laws are practically non-existent, allowing them to get away with virtual enslavement of local populations?

These are not the only, nor even perhaps the most important, questions we face. But it's important to recognize that we, too, face choices which may well not be as clear-cut as we would like. We need to pray for discernment to distinguish the reality from the parody, and to act accordingly. The final verse of the chapter is one of the most famous in the whole book. It offers the greatest parody of all. It is more or less certain that the number 666 represents, by one of many formulae well known at the time, the name NERO CAESAR when written in Hebrew characters. (Many peoples, and many languages, used letters as numbers, as we would if we devised a system where A=1, B=2 and so on.) The monster who was, is not, and is to come looks pretty certainly to be Nero.

But the number 666 isn't just a cryptogram. It's also a parody. The number of perfection, not least for John, would be, we assume, 777. Some have even suggested that the name JESUS comes out, in some systems, as 888 - a kind of super-perfection. But for John there is little doubt. Nero, and the system he represented and embodied, was but a parody of the real thing, one short of the right number three times over. Jesus was the reality; Nero, just a dangerous, blasphemous copy. We do well to recognize this,

but we also do well to search our consciences and our own societies and enquire to what extent we, too, have been deceived by fakes posing as the real thing (120-122).

Optional Discussion Questions

1. Where are we faced today with choices that reflect our allegiances? That is, when are we asked to make someone or something else Lord in place of Jesus?
2. When are we asked to compromise the demands of discipleship in regards to our money, sex, time, or power to get along more readily with others in our world on our floor/ in class/ at work/ in relationships/ in politics?
3. Remember the main theme of Revelation: Jesus is _____ and he!

Closing Prayer: Reveal to us, Holy Spirit, the idols that we have set up in your place. Cast every idol from its throne, so that we will worship you and you alone. To God alone be all our worship, praise, honor and glory. Now and forevermore! Amen.