

Mark 1:21-28

Rev 12:1-6

### **Jesus, battling on our behalf.**

Sadly I don't think it is simply the reference to a red dragon in this morning's passage from Revelation that reminded me of the Welsh flag... and yes I realise that the red dragon of the Welsh flag doesn't have seven heads! I fear it is more a rather fanatical devotion to watching the 6 Nations rugby tournament that starts next week, and the knowledge that Wales come to 'Fortress Twickenham' in a fortnight's time.

In our passage from Revelation this morning, we have in prophetic vision, the titanic battle between Jesus (the baby) and the forces that seek to overpower God's plan for the world (the seven-headed red dragon), with the faithful of a new Israel as a shocked and traumatised participant (the woman in need of God's protection because of what she's been involved in).

The babe is born into the world with the intention on God's part of bringing the nations into line, to rule them with a rod of iron (a reference to Psalm 2:7-9)... like a good referee and his whistle in a rugby match; think Nigel Owens if you have half a clue what I'm talking about ;-). It's a long match - it's been going for a couple of millennia and it's not over yet, for Revelation is a vision of Jesus' second coming into the world, when he will finally complete the work of God's new kingdom when heaven and earth are drawn together as one.

In echoes of Herod's attempt to kill the infant King of the Jews in Matthew 2 which are thwarted by God's intervention into the journey's of both the Magi and the Holy Family, here the danger posed by the forces opposing God personified in the dragon are circumvented by the salvation story being compressed into a single moment, birth, death and resurrection, happening in the same instant as the babe's ascension to God's throne.

The woman is not a re-incarnation of Mary; the visions of Revelation are way more multi-layered than that simple analogy. More; she is both Eve, the original mother of all human life who's "seed would one day crush the serpents head, according to Genesis 3:15, and she is daughter Israel, the bride of YHWH, the personification of both the faithful Israel who struggled to remain a holy nation, and ultimately the redefined Israel, Jew and Gentile alike brought together in the church, the bride of Christ, the fellowship of those who have responded with hope to Jesus authority in his first encounter with God's creation. It is she, us indeed, that have been left to go through the painful birth-pangs and battle of bringing about the completion of God's Kingdom.

Jesus, in his lifetime, right from the first days of his ministry, understood the nature of the conflict that all those who battle on his behalf have to deal with. He witnessed it himself, and he acted with authority on our behalf, and he still does, breaking down the forces that wreak havoc in individuals, communities, and continents through mental illness, addiction, abuse of various kinds, and racial and religious hatred. Sometimes it is those locked into those frightening situations who are most aware of when it is Jesus who is taking the strain, pushing back the powers of darkness, and helping them break free; those of us on the outside are perhaps blind to the significance of what is said and done.

Which was oh so true in Capernaum's synagogue in our Gospel this morning. Yes, the language is medically outdated, but the imbalance of power between any illness and our human weakness, between one spiritual realm and another, is not. Those who witnessed this young man take an unusual tone of authority all of his own, without direct reference to scripture or the wisdom of his elders as the scribes did, did not understand from where that authority came. That is why they did not recognise the incongruity that lay in

this Jesus from Nazareth being hailed as the Holy One of God by the very powers that Jesus, fresh from wilderness, already knew were ranged against him.

It is good that in this typically brief account from Mark's Gospel, we see the importance of those with what we would now describe as mental health issues being welcomed into the worship, prayer, and teaching of a community of faith, because it is there, or should I say here, where the possibility of encounter with Jesus is hopefully heightened, through which they might find healing and freedom.

The church should be a safe place for those who need Jesus' help. Whether gathered in one place like this morning, or flung out like stars around our communities, battered by the tail of the dragon that is heartbreak, illness and despair, we too need to know we have God's power and protection by the very fact of being the church. As the people of God we have one another to turn to for encouragement, strength and wisdom. More importantly we have the person of Jesus quietly sat there with us in every situation, listening to the powers of darkness speak. With his gentle authority as the Messiah, he offers us the understanding that can challenge those who use the name of Jesus inappropriately, who try to manipulate situations to undermine his credibility, and can help counteract with modern medicine, the force that ill-health of any sort has to over-power us.

The vision of Revelation is yet to be fulfilled. In the now-and-not-yet of God's work of re-creation, Jesus has not yet returned to complete God's task. The woman that represents us, God's faithful worshippers, is still in child-birth, and thus we still have a very intense battle on our hands, faced as we are with powers who in all their multi-headed awfulness, don't want the authority of Jesus to be revealed in it's fullness. This is no rugby match, no game, but we do have a referee with God's full authority; Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God, who was,... and is,... and is to come. Amen.