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And War Broke Out in Heaven (Revelation 12. 7-12)

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No doubt you've heard the joke about the person who was taken to one of Shakespeare's plays for the first time, and complained afterwards that it was full of cliches. Reading the Revelation to John feels a bit like that. You keep coming across phrases or images you recognize and that have entered into common speech – 'the four horsemen of the apocalypse', 'the mark of the beast', 'the grapes of wrath' – all suggesting how profoundly this text has affected our cultural imagination. Yet perhaps the deepest, most pervasive influence of all is expressed in the reading we just heard – with its sense that there's some kind of cosmic battle underway, a mortal conflict between good and evil at the heart of reality. This is a vision that saturates Western culture – from Star Wars to the Lord of the Rings to Harry Potter – the battle of light against dark, forces beyond human ken playing out their will to power in the human realm. It makes for great cinema. But in terms of theology ... and moral life – it seems fraught with danger – more mythical than evangelical.

After all, the Jesus of the gospels is portrayed as having an extraordinarily nuanced and compassionate moral vision. Others saw people like the woman caught in adultery, or Zaccheus and Matthew the tax collectors, or the Gerasene demoniac, as defined and so rightly condemned by their perceived 'sin', their captivity to evil. But Jesus is able to see them whole and so to *enable* their goodness. He consistently warns against our tendency to judge each other mercilessly and cast each other out, to presume that we know the real condition of another's heart. 'Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?' (Matthew 7.3) The gospel teaches that we are to forgive seventy times seven, to bear with one another, overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12.21).

The vision of Revelation, by contrast, seems dangerously ‘black and white’, evil *versus* good more than evil *transformed* by good. Theologically, this seems to dignify ‘evil’ with its own existence – underpinning too dualistic a view of reality. And morally – well, once we’ve identified us as ‘good’ and them as ‘evil’, there’s nothing we’re not justified doing to defeat them in the name of God. Thus, as terrified civilians in Ukraine were fleeing Russian bombs, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, Patriarch Kirrill, was justifying the invasion as a ‘holy war’. Ukraine, he said, has sold its soul to Western libertinism, shown by its tolerance of homosexuality and its hosting of a Gay Pride Parade. The fight, therefore, is not only against NATO, Kirrill said, but against darker, diabolical powers: ‘We have entered into a struggle that has not a physical, but a metaphysical significance’.¹ Likewise, QAnon conspiracy theorists, persuaded that a Satanic cabal in government, the media and ‘the deep state’ is secretly running the world while engaged in child sex trafficking and cannibalism, feel themselves justified in violent action to overthrow those deemed involved. The vision of a war in heaven seems, even now in the 21st century, all too readily translated into the willingness to wage spiritually justified war on earth. The whole imaginary seems corrupting and immature.

Or so it does, at first. But as I’ve sat with this some more, I wonder. In particular, I wonder about the significance of Revelation’s sense of the depth and reality of evil in our world. Think again of the war in Ukraine, and the horrific stories emerging of gang rape perpetrated by Russian soldiers on women and men, girls and boys; the mass graves of tortured, murdered civilians. Or think of data reported this week showing that the world’s biggest fossil fuel firms, such as ExxonMobil and Gazprom, are quietly planning scores of so-called ‘carbon bomb’ oil and gas projects. These are projects that would drive the climate way beyond internationally agreed temperature limits. These companies are effectively placing ‘multibillion-dollar bets

¹ N.N. Trakakis, ‘Is Orthodoxy Finished?’ <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/trakakis-ukraine-is-orthodoxy-finished/13815854>, 28 March 2022.

against humanity halting global heating’.² A leading climate justice activist in the UK describes these plans as ‘a brutal calculation that the interest of fossil fuel giants and their billions in profit is more important than the lives of people who are overwhelmingly black, brown and poor.’

I suggested earlier that Revelation’s vision of a war in heaven of good against evil can seem dangerously ‘black and white’ as compared with what looks like the more reconciling, transforming moral vision of the gospels. Yet it’s true there are choices and actions, ways of being, that are utterly incompatible with goodness, love and truth. They are not just wrong or misguided but qualitatively, implacably, wilfully opposed. And maybe part of what the book of Revelation demands is that we not be so squeamish and liberal-minded as to fail to acknowledge the scale and reach of mercilessness and brutality at work in our world, and thus fail to recognise the courage, commitment and fierceness necessary if goodness is to endure and prevail.

And if something like this is true, then two questions I think become key. The first is, what are the markers or the signs of ‘evil’? What really is irreducibly opposed to good and so unable to be tolerated? Patriarch Kirrill and the rest of us clearly see this differently – so how do we discern what truly is of God and what can never be? According to our passage, that which is opposed to God, ‘who is called the Devil and Satan’, is characterised as ‘the deceiver of the whole world’ (Rev. 12.9). He’s also said to be an ‘accuser’; he accuses people ‘day and night before our God’, rather than pleading for them, interceding for them, being on their side. In other words, and unlike Christ, the ancient serpent wants the worst for them, for his work is to destroy.

When he is thrown down to earth, the text imagines the serpent pursuing a woman – who may be understood as Mary, the mother of Jesus and the mother of the church: ‘Then from his mouth’, our passage continues, ‘the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came

² Investigation undertaken by a global team of Guardian environment reporters working with analysts and academics uncovering data. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2022/may/11/fossil-fuel-carbon-bombs-climate-breakdown-oil-gas>, 11 May 2022.

to the help of the woman, it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth' (Rev. 12.15-16). Writes commentator Peter Llewellyn: 'In the symbolism of John's vision, the persecution of the church takes the form of an attempted reversal of Noah's flood and Moses' crossing of the Red Sea'. Where God has dried up the flood and parted the waters to enable life, Satan sends the waters out again to consume creation and the people of God. But note how the earth acts to swallow up what he pours out, for ultimately 'the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it'.³ If we ask what, according to the book of Revelation, are the markers, the signs of the evil that is ultimately irreconcilable with God, the answer comes: it's deception, it's accusation without mercy, it's heedless destruction – in a word, de-creation.

And this leads us to the second key question – how may this evil be overcome? In the vision of Revelation, it's clear evil cannot ultimately win. 'The dragon and his angels' have already been defeated and there's no longer any place for them in heaven, in reality. Any residual conflict we experience is penultimate – a consequence, so the text imagines, of diabolical frustration and the knowledge 'that his time is short'. But how has this victory been won? Why is it taking so long to take effect on earth? And in the meantime, how are we supposed to respond to evil's apparently continuing power among and over us?

The metaphor of heavenly warfare inclines us to assume that the power of Satan is overcome by violent means. But this leads, as we've seen, to the all too commonly assumed corollary that *human* holy wars are necessary for bringing in whatever version of the reign of God we subscribe to. As if the end, justifies the means. As Eugene Peterson remarks, 'Religious faith, especially when zealous, is no stranger to the exercise of violent force'.⁴ But notice what our text actually says about how the victory is won: 'Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,

³ Peter Llewellyn, "The Unveiling": Reflections on the Book of Revelation as a Spiritual Adventure', February 2017 (Printed by the York Community Resource Centre), p.74.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & The Praying Imagination* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), p.125.

‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down ... But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death’ (Rev. 12.10-11).

Remember last week? When we saw at the centre of Revelation’s depiction of the worship of heaven, a Lamb standing as if slain (Rev. 5.6). His worthiness to be praised, his capacity to redeem, connected not to his might, but his suffering; not to his dealing out violence and death, but his undergoing of it. Here in chapter 12, it seems the message is the same. Evil has been conquered by the undergoing rather than the dishing out of slaughter; goodness has won the day through the blood of the Lamb, Christ’s way of self-abandonment, for he has laid down his life for his friends. How this actually happens, what it means for how **we** are to respond to the world’s evil – these are our themes for next week.

For now, let me finish with an executive summary of this week’s effort. The war in heaven, the casting out of Satan, signifies that evil is not ultimately real; it will not ultimately prevail. Nevertheless, it’s operative in our world – whether it takes form in the murderous, merciless brutality of an invading army or the equally murderous and merciless behaviour of corporations sacrificing the planet for profit. So the question becomes, how is this evil to be overcome? Is it cast out at the same level, by the same violent, self-serving means? Or must it be dealt with, metaphysically and morally, in an entirely different way? This is the question Revelation puts to us, the heart of the gospel. I invite you to hold it close in coming days.