

Revelation 13

Imitated God

How well can you smell? The nose of a sniffer dog is about 2000 times more sensitive than that of humans. They can detect drops of blood only visible under a microscope - even after they've been scrubbed. They can detect drugs even when they're hidden under smearings of coffee and Vick's vapo-rub. They detect explosives, firearms, human remains, cancer, even CDs and DVDs. Pigs aren't bad at smell either. Traditionally used to find truffles, the pigs in this picture are being used to detect mines - at least they tend not to eat the mines. I remember seeing a huge sleeping sow once - that was, until an apple core was dropped about two feet from its nose. Bit by bit, from a twitch in the nostrils, the enormous animal roused itself and lumbered over to consume the morsel.

The Need for Wisdom in this World

God has given us Chapter 13 of Revelation because he wants us to be aware of the pervasive presence of evil. We can't always see it very clearly, but we can sometimes smell it. John describes this evil in the mythic language of the Beast. The Spirit's goal, in this chapter, is to unmask a master of deception, revealing that which leads the whole world astray as "the Beast." The chapter concludes: "**This calls for wisdom.**" In other words, we need the insight of God's Spirit in order to see the truth of the situation.

In this sermon I want to show you how the vision fits together in its own terms. Then I want to suggest how I think John probably saw the Beast in his own day. Then I want to think about where we might see or smell the Beast in our day. And I'm going to end with a personal challenge.

So let's look at Revelation 13, first of all, see how it fits together and what it tells us about the Beast.

The Dragon and the Beast

If you look closely at your Bibles you'll see that the very beginning of v.1 is usually connected to the end of the preceding chapter, which was all about the Dragon - or Satan. And so it concludes: "**And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea.**" Revelation is a book which shows what *lies behind* the world we apprehend with our normal senses. And here in Chapter 13 we discover that *behind* the evil of the Beast, lies the greater evil of the dragon. In other words, *behind* the evil of this world lies a primeval opponent of God - the Accuser of his people and the Destroyer of all that's good.

So in v.2 we read that **“the dragon gave the beast his power”** - and John then goes on to describe this power at work. But in v.11 he tells of *another beast*. The first beast came out of the sea - which links it to further to the *abode* of the dragon, and the second beast comes **“out of the earth”**, but he **“speaks like a dragon, and exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf.”** (v.11). So through these links in word and image, we can see how the beasts and the dragon are connected to one another and do wth work of one another.

First... Second... Third...

What we have is a structure like this: the second beast is in the foreground - less powerful perhaps, but a lot closer to us. The second beast is the enforcer fo the first beast - a really nasty peice of work - the local gangland boss. The first beast is more remote - its habitat is the sea - but its power stretches further. Yet even this beast derives its power from elsewhere. John's saying that it's not enough to simply name the huge powers of evil in this world - the architects of gulags, the serial killers, the abusers and so on - we have to understand that they themselves do the work of the ultimate evil one - the one primevally opposed to God's creative and liberating desire.

A Blphemous Parody

What are some of the characteristics of this Beast? Firstly, it's a blaspheming beast. The very names on its multiple heads are blasphemous - in other words, whatever it does is relentlessly offensive towards God. Then we read that it **“looked like a leopard, with feet like a bear and a mouth like a lion.”** It can use different facets for different situations perhaps. It's versatile, you could say, resourceful perhaps - or slippery, cunning, a master of disguise.

Then we read that one of its heads carries fatal wound that has been healed. In other words this beast *parodies* the true resurrection of Jesus - it has its own resurrection - just like a fake product nowadays will appear to have the same properties as the one it's modelled on. Then we read that it causes people to worship the dragon - again a parody of God - indeed the Beast itself shall also be worshipped - revealing an underlying self-seeking motive. The power which commands this worship is based on pride - so different to the self-sacrificial Lamb of God and the worship He evokes. And the Beast uses his power to make war on God's people, the saints - which is what his authority has been given for - by the dragon - who was always the Destroyer.

The Second Beast

Then we come to the second Beast. Again we see these characteristics of parody, mockery, blasphemy, and deception: he has two horns like a Lamb - it's a parody of the saving sacrifice of Christ, **"but he spoke like a dragon"** (v.11) We read that **"he made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast"** - in other words, he may have the appearance of a Lamb, but there's a ruthless streak of coercion running through. He's even able to perform miracles - which amaze the people and dupe them into following him. As we read on from v.14 we see how he deceives the people through a combination of magical powers and violent force. He forces everyone, and controls their daily lives. Their relationship with him isn't personal - his presence is felt through a brute mark - a branding, a number.

This is what the Beast is like. But where did John see the Beast in his own day?

The Power of Empire

Most likely John saw the Beast manifested through the power and institutions of the Roman Empire, where Caesars were self-appointed divinities and their worship was enforced through the erection of huge statues. Here's a picture of the Emperor Domitian's statue which was erected in Ephesus - one of the places John was writing to. The forearm alone measures nearly two metres, so you can imagine the impact and power of the Roman Empire, exercised through its cult. But John isn't referring specifically to the Emperor Domitian. Rather, he sees the whole institution of the Empire as beastly. Some Emperors were relatively benign, others were deliberately blasphemous. Caligula had his own massive statue deliberately set up in the Jerusalem Temple to be worshipped in place of God. Nero set fire to Rome and instigated the most brutal persecution of Christians known at the time.

Nero - Icon of Oppressive Empire

Probably John sees Nero as the epitome of the Beast, and there are two strong indicators of this in the passage. The first is in v.3 where he says **that "one of the heads of the beast seemed to have a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed."** (v.3) Nero died in AD 68 by stabbing himself in the throat, but his burial was done in secret, and over the following decades the myth that he'd either not really die, or would be resurrected and return was so powerful that a string of impostors rose up claiming to be him. It's not unlike the sort of myths engendered by the lack of conclusive evidence for the death of Hitler. Indeed, the last presented himself round about the time John was writing some time in the 90s. So that's the first clue linking the Beast with Nero, and it shows how this Beast or evil has a habit of turning up again and again in different guises.

666

The second clue is in the last verse of the chapter, where we're exhorted to "**calculate the number of the Beast, which is a man's number: 666.**" What is this number all about? Well, most likely John's employing a popular form of code, in which each letter of the alphabet is given a different numerical value - it's called Gematria - and we find it in all sorts of places in the ancient world, even in graffiti such as that from Pompeii "I love the girl whose number is 545." So, many attempts have been made to solve the riddle of 666, but the best answer is to turn the Greek words "Nero Caesar" back into Hebrew Letters, which, when they're given gematrical values, add up to the sum of 666. It may sound convoluted to us, but the same method can be seen with exactly the same words - Nero Caesar - in an Aramaic document of the same period. Put together with the myth of Nero's revival, there's a reasonable likelihood that this is the answer.

"Caesar Nero" = "Beast"

But there's a further significance in this number, because the Greek word for "beast" - *therion* - when turned into Hebrew script *also* has the value of 666. In other words, the numerology itself, mystically shows that Nero, *representing the very worst of the Roman Empire*, is the Beast. John isn't saying that the Beast *is* Nero in a one-to-one correlation, but he's saying that *in his day* the Beast found a particular focus through the person and deeds of Nero - the ultimate icon of an oppressive and anti-God regime.

Beastly Priests and Priestly Enforcers

Well, that tells us about the first Beast - what about the second Beast? Remember that progression from the Dragon, through the first and second beasts? In personal terms it might look like this: The Beast from the Sea is the oppressive Empire - whose troops, by the way, were borne by sea to where John was writing. And the Beast from the Earth, therefore, is local flesh and blood - perhaps a human servant of the beast. When we look at what John says about him we find he's been given authority by the Emperor, he does miraculous signs including causing fire to come down, he sets up a statue of the Emperor, apparently breathing life into it, and orders people to worship it on pain of death.

All these things point to the second beast as representing the local priests of the emperor cult, who with their magic-making and thunder machines, instilled wonder, fear and dread at the Imperial Shrines. These people are the local Gestapo of the regime - people who probably never met the Emperor in person, yet act as enforcers on his murderous authority throughout the realm.

What John writes amounts to a focused critique of the global and local politics of his day. He's showing how self-serving local officials are really only serving the wider interests of a self-serving and brutal empire. But more than that, he shows that the Empire itself serves an evil intent on a cosmic scale - far bigger than it could ever imagine. The people in power are actually mere pawns. They behave as if acting with sovereign freedom, but in fact they're slaves of their evil dragon master.

Where might we see, or smell, the beast in our own day?

The Beast in our World

I've already mentioned the Gestapo, and it's not difficult to associate the oppression of the Nazi Empire with the power of the Beast. When we read of the mark placed on the right hand or forehead, it's not hard to see this reflected in system of triangles and stars which the Nazis forced gypsies, Jews, communists, homosexuals, and others to wear. When we read of the second beast who dazzled the crowds with his magical extravaganzas and promises of wealth, happiness and prosperity - all of which would come through loyal adherence to the Imperial cult - it's not difficult to think of the Nazi propaganda machine, through which a nation and more were almost totally taken in.

A Christian Speaks

But rather than picking on such an obvious target, that now seems remote to many of us, I'd like to read to you at some length from Allan Boesak's commentary on Revelation, written after a period of solitary confinement in prison under South African Apartheid, as recently as 1987 - just 21 years ago.

"In South Africa, John's warning has become chilling reality. The state of affairs even at this time in our history is painfully clear - the continued racism, exploitation, and oppression; the continued inhumanity of the system; the incredible violence of the state and the ongoing terrorising of the innocent. Our children are shot in the streets like dogs; our pregnant women are beaten and kicked by laughing soldiers; the judicial system finds torturers not guilty and declares murdering policemen free from all blame even if the evidence is there for all to see. Those who struggle for justice, peace, and genuine reconciliation on the basis of their Christian faith are charged with treason and subversion, are banned and killed. Those who support apartheid, who abet the evildoers in their evil, are rewarded with money and power. The upholders of apartheid and oppression, the killers of children, sit in parliament and call themselves "servants of God." Their words are arrogant and blasphemous, for their power is not from the Living One, the God of Israel, but from the dragon, the deceiver and liar."

Commenting on the mark of the beast, Boesak continues, *"One remembers the explanation of the Minister of Defence when the South African Defence Force, in their siege of Duduza township near Johannesburg, branded township residents on their hands with indelible ink. "It was to show," he explained, "that these people had already been interrogated and the army is now sure they are not involved in illegal activities. It is a sign that they have nothing to fear." Many of us were puzzled, many stunned, many indignant. John of Patmos would not have been surprised at all.*

John says the number 666 is a human number. Don't be confused by the symbols as if they spiritualise the struggle, taking it out of our earthly history of sweat, blood, and tears into some esoteric battle between the cosmic powers of good and evil. It is a human number - a human being abusing power that was given for the sake of good, overstepping the borders of what is permissible. In this way John reminds his readers that evil is not just a spiritual force. It has a human face.

At the beginning of our encounter with the beast, I made the point that John calls it beast because in it all humanity has been destroyed. As a result of its awesome powers... even though they knew it was a beast and called it thus, they still worshipped it as if it were God. They completely forgot the testimony of Israel and the church: "None is like thee, O Lord." Now John says, Be wise, it is a human number. Yes, it is a beast, but it is human... The poor and the oppressed have always understood this, and Desmond Tutu, bishop of God's oppressed people in Soweto and in South Africa, speaks for them all as he repeats John's truth to the face of Louis Le Grange, Minister of Law and Order: "Mr Minister, you are not God. You are merely a man. And one day your name will only be a faint scribble on the pages of history while the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, lives forever."

Spirit - Show us!

What we're asking the Spirit to show us are places where oppression is given free reign - especially in the name of freedom and prosperity; we're looking for the lies of godless culture, or where the name of God is used to justify the sins of man. We're looking for abuse of power or person, the crushing of humanity, the arrogating of certain individuals to bear down on others - and we need to challenge our own collusion with this beast.

This time of year in Rwanda is when they remember the terrible genocide. Many churches colluded with that beastly activity. In Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, and Fascist Latin America and Mugabe's Zimbabwe, significant portions of the church colluded with the work of the Enemy. The church is human - we are vulnerable to being led astray, and that's why repentance and reconciliation have to have such a foundational place in Christian spirituality. We collude with the oppression of the beast through what we buy, how we live, what we look at, how we speak, the way we deal with others in the family, community, or workplace.

Martin Luther King

40 years ago last Friday, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis Tennessee. He was the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church when he began to see the full force of the beast, rampant in racism - and began to follow his calling to combat it. In 1963, he wrote from prison, *"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."* We're not all going to be the leaders of great movements for justice, but we can pray - for the church and the world - for Christian dissenters with the stature of Deitrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Janani Luwum, Wang Zhiming - we can be informed, we can act where possible, we can have compassion, and comfort those around us down trodden. We may not live in a situation such as exists in many parts of the world, but all around us are people who've lost their way, struggling in oppressive relationships, damaging addictions, pointless hopes, empty materialism, spiralling debt, guilt, and loss. We need to pray for a godly outrage so that when we smell the work of the beast we commit ourselves all the more to the peace and life-giving army of the Lamb.

When you listen to the speeches of Martin Luther King, you hear not the voice of the dragon, but the voice of the Lamb. In 1964, on accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, he said, *"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant."* Martin Luther King had a Revelation perspective. He could see beyond the mountain. Like us who read the Book, he knew the end of the story. But reading it in a book is one thing, having the faith to apply it in life, and live by it as he did, is another. The beast does *not* have the last word - Jesus Christ *does* have the last word.

Let's not end there...

We find the insight to distinguish between Lamb and Dragon when we realise that we ourselves need redeeming by the unconditional love of Christ. So let me challenge you this evening to turn away from what is not of God and turn in Christ' power, to passionately bind yourself to his values and his kingdom. With that in mind, I don't want to give the last word to the Beast, but I want to end with the first sentence of Chapter 14, because just like the end of Chapter 12, this too is surely joined to this beastly chapter as the triumphant dawn of a new possibility.

"Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like the loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and elders." (Rev 14:1-3)

And we'll look at that next week.