

**Deut 8:15-20, Rev 12: 1-5a, Mark 1:21-28**

The Leader of Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition in the United Kingdom has been likened to Wallace of Wallace and Gromit fame but never, I think, to a dragon or an unclean spirit.

And loyal these opponents – the dragon and the unclean spirit – were not. They were out to oppose Jesus and the bringing in of God's kingdom. They were amongst the leaders of His Majesty's most fearsome and fervent opposition.

The visions revealed to John were exceedingly graphic - as vivid and real and yet fantastical as our dreams. If we close our eyes for a while can't we just see the woman clothed with the sun wearing a crown of twelve stars, standing on the moon and about to give birth – a glorious image of creation – but crashing into that image of beauty and life comes an equally fantastical creature but this time one of destruction whose purpose is to devour the new creation. That intention is, however, thwarted as the new creation is joined with God in heaven.

It's interesting how differently dragons are understood in different cultures. The dragon in the revelation to John is a very different species to that of this Chinese new year, albeit with some characteristics in common. The Eastern Dragon is a symbol of good fortune and sign of intense power being regarded as a divine beast. In Eastern philosophy, the Dragon is said to be a deliverer of good fortune and a master of authority. Therefore, those people born in Dragon years are especially well-respected.

Both dragons have power and they are masters of authority but it's in their use that the dragons can be distinguished. There was no doubting John's dragon's intention – it was to destroy the new birth, God's kingdom.

There was a struggle going on in today's Gospel story too – a struggle between Jesus and the unclean spirit who would oppose him. And it was the authority of Jesus which won the day.

Opposition is something we in the church have to face and have to deal with. In this country it's not the life and death struggle it was for the new-born and the dragon in John's vision or for many who suffer persecution for their Christian faith today. Our opposition is varied – from apathy, to being seen as a target on which to project people's disgruntlement, from being seen as an

irrelevance to being an obstacle to people enjoying the promises of today's false prophets.

Opposition is what we all as followers of Christ have to face and deal with. But how do we do it? In the latest edition of the Pompey Chimes there is a picture of Bishop Christopher's visit to the Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters in Newport on the Isle of Wight. I went along too together with the newly appointed Chaplain to the service. One wag, sitting but a few feet away from me, suggested the headline

Bishop and senior staff hone their fire-fighting skills.

Well, ministry does sometimes feel like fire-fighting. I'm currently being drawn into a dispute on the Island over the use of church land for car parking by local residents. The problem has been going on for years but has come to a head and the Archdeacon has now been asked to come in with her fire extinguisher to put out the blaze. Except that it doesn't quite work like that. The temperature is getting very hot on both sides. The residents are accusing the church of "Unchristian behaviour" and the Church Warden is using language such as "we can't be seen to lose and "they mustn't win."

The Kingdom of God **is** about winning, but winning people over by God's ways which means that in this world's eyes we may sometimes be perceived as losers. I don't yet know what the outcome of the car-parking dispute will be but what I want to ensure is that "win" or "lose" in adversarial terms that church community will have conducted itself in ways which reflect the values of God's kingdom. There may well be the need for honest and straight talking but there will also be the need for listening. Perhaps the conclusion will be that we will have to agree to disagree but if so that the people of that community will have come to understand as a result of our meetings and discussions that the church in that place wants to engage with them and be part of them and welcomes them.

Welcome is a very important way of dealing with outright opposition or apathy or hesitancy. My journey back this week from the Island on the hovercraft was made the more enjoyable for meeting up with a former colleague from my days in the law and his partner in his law firm. My friend and I used to be on opposite sides – I for the prosecution and he for the defence – because that's how the adversarial system in this country works, but what we were both about was justice.

But it wasn't law we talked about: it was the church's welcome, or rather lack of welcome. My friend's colleague told me about his experience of taking his child for baptism and being turned away. He could have a thanksgiving service but not baptism. He didn't expound on the reason but it sounded as though the church had decided that he and his family didn't somehow meet their criteria for baptism. And that experience, not surprisingly, had left him with a view of the Church of England, for which quite rightly, he held me to account. And that's what accounted for our interesting trip over the Solent. There may well have been good reasons for that church holding to the position it took but it obviously went about explaining those reasons very badly and thereby closed the door rather than opened it to someone who might just have stayed.

Welcome was and is at the heart of who God is and therefore welcome must be at the heart of who we are as people of God. It can disarm our opponents in all their variety and open up communication. And it's in listening and talking that opposition has a chance to become reconciliation.

We are told in the Gospel story that Jesus had an authority which amazed that synagogue congregation. I think each one of us has been given that authority too; the inner authority which comes from the security of knowing who we are as followers of Christ and what we are about; an authority which sometimes prompts people to say they wish they had what we have.

So let's be confident in that authority and use that God-given presence to win over today's dragons and unclean spirits and false prophets and welcome them into God's kingdom.

Let us pray:

God of life and light

give us, we pray, the confidence not to shy away from those who speak and act against your kingdom but to claim your authority in winning them over for you. Through Jesus Christ, your Son our Saviour, Amen.