

Sermon 30/10/22 Saints v the Beasts.

A few weeks ago, I found myself walking up the road with some friends. We naturally fell into two pairs and as we walked and talked, I realised that although I had known the person, I was with for some years this was the first time we had had a one-to-one conversation. I already knew him to be amusing and knowledgeable, but as we talked about a mutual friend, I found that he was also perceptive and empathetic. Because I had never sought that conversation, I had never discovered the whole of his character.

In our Old Testament reading this morning poor Daniel has what must rate with the very worst of all nightmares. Four terrifying beasts;

A lion with eagle's wings

A bear with tusks

A leopard with four wings

A hideous beast with iron teeth and ten horns.

In his vision he seeks an explanation for what has frightened him. The four beasts, he is told, represent the four great nations that will threaten the people of God. But in the end God will prevail. The saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it for ever.

This has left me with two questions. What is a saint? And what is the equivalent of those beasts today?

So, first question first. I have resisted that preacher thing, of looking the word 'saint' up in the dictionary because I know that whatever the answer it won't satisfy me. I know also that the Roman Catholic church has a formal process for someone becoming a saint but that will also be too narrow an answer for now. So, I have opted for 'someone set aside for God's special purpose', or more simply 'us' and potentially, 'everybody'. The faithful on earth now and those who were on earth but are now in heaven.

The New Testament passage from Luke provides a possible answer to my second question. Jesus tells the crowd of things that are restricting to the quality of life, putting people at a distinct disadvantage. Beasts not necessarily sprouting horns and vicious teeth, but equally frightening: the disadvantages of poverty, hunger, sadness and hatred. All of which by making a person live in a state of unhealthy anxiety can stunt the ability of that person to fulfil their potential, and to form healthy communities with others, and with God.

How easy is it to see those 'beasts' in other places, in other parts of the world, amongst communities that we might refer to as 'them' rather than as 'us'? Of course, in recent months we have had to acknowledge that these beasts are closer than we would wish. We hear regularly in the news about people unable to pay their fuel bills, needing help from the foodbank to eat, mental health issues and crimes committed against others just because they are different in some way. They may not have the ferocity of the beasts in Daniel's vision but those beasts of Jesus' sermon are no less frightening or life sapping.

What a fantastic notion that we can all be saints. We can all be but will only manage to be if we can also conquer those beasts. I feel that we each have our own personal set of beasts dependent upon our situation and personality. Some will be raging giants, others perhaps smaller more a nibbling at the edges sort of thing. So I am adding to Daniel's and Jesus' lists some suggestions of my own: exclusion, prejudice, selfishness and greed.

In verse 31 I am sure most of us will recognise, 'do to others as you would have them do to you'. That is such a well-used expression that it will be recognised by others with little Biblical knowledge. It is one of those sayings which has crept into everyday language. Leaving its origins behind. But it is a good mantra for sainthood. And it may help us to achieve victory.

Our fight will not take place in the hills of the Middle East, nor in the streets of Shirley. Mostly our battle will be within ourselves as we remember that our own small acts can serve to conquer or to feed our own beasts. So many of the things that we do when seen in another light can be interpreted differently. How often do we rush to sit with our friends, without a thought of how that may leave the newcomer feeling? There are our own built in prejudices. I know that as a younger child I naturally sympathise with anyone with an older sibling. Its not deliberate but that doesn't make it any less real.

And I am not even going to touch on who ate the last slice of chocolate cake.

Daniel was told that when the beasts were vanquished the saints would possess the kingdom of God for ever. And Luke helpfully reports some of the ways in which Jesus suggests that we can do this. Love our enemies, pray for those who ill treat us or turn the other cheek. None of those are about actions designed to draw in our boundaries, to make us more 'fortress church'. They are about spreading our influence opening outwards, being set aside for God's special purpose. Not set aside as in put in a corner, but set aside as in given a specific role.

We do not know when the role will kick in. Perhaps in a conversation like that one that I had a few weeks ago when I at last took the opportunity to know someone better. It could be a more obvious time. Over the last few weeks in the Bible Art sessions that we do with the children at TGPASTJ we have been talking about harvest. The children are well versed in what harvest means today, about sharing food with others who have less, about the fact that those others may live nearby. What they were less clear about is the importance of harvest when you have to grow everything you eat. They are bright kids and we quickly found our way to talking about the weather and God. But sometimes people just need that little push.

The saints we are told are a community, a community with a special purpose, to conquer those beasts and give us an example to follow. Before we can vanquish we need to identify and understand what those beasts are, and they will be different for each of us. But the effort will be worth it, just as it is worth the effort to turn those acquaintances into friends.