

STRANGER TIMES, Week #4: "BENDED KNEES" (Pete Greig)

- Where have you seen God at work in your life this week? (Share any brief examples and encouragements).
- Was there anything from Sunday's message which you found particularly inspiring or challenging?
- Was there anything else you particularly noticed?

Revelation 13:1-18 (Please read the whole chapter)

¹ *The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads... ¹¹ Then I saw a second beast coming out of the earth...¹⁸ Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.*

Revelation is a book written in code. To understand it well, you need to read it (at least in parts) more like a political cartoon than an article from the front page of tomorrow's newspaper. This chapter is one of those parts! We know who the dragon is.

Revelation 20:2 unlocks this little piece of code: *"the dragon, that ancient snake, who is the devil, or Satan."* This is the original 'chaos monster', overcome before the formation of the world in some ancient near eastern creation myths, and which also receives a passing reference in some of the Psalms (and in the book of Job) – along with *Leviathan*, the monster of the deep, and *Behemoth*, the great beast of the earth. It was no accident when the 17th Century English writer, Thomas Hobbes gave the title *Leviathan* to his book about politics. To John the Revelator, *Leviathan* is the oppressing empire, whom he names as 'Babylon', because Babylon is 'code' for every empire that there has ever been – it is every monster-civilization which swallows people whole. Every 1st Century reader knew he meant Rome – the city built on seven hills. Every Hebrew and Greek letter had a numeric equivalent, and it is not too hard to find the number of the name 'Emperor Nero'. In Hebrew Gematria, 7 was the number of perfection, whereas 6 was the number of humanity – the number of a man – and 666, the number of a man aspiring to be a god¹ – a veritable beast from the earth. In the face of the monsters, John simply writes, *"This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people"* (13:10).

- *There has been much speculation over the years – especially from those who have read the book of Revelation as if it is 'tomorrow's news written today' – as to who the Anti-Christ might be. To Martin Luther it was the Pope (who almost certainly returned the compliment), Mussolini was a popular candidate in the 1930s and 40s, Henry Kissinger in the 1970s. There have been people claiming in the last couple of years that the COVID vaccine is the 'mark of the beast' – a few years ago it was barcodes! Do you think this is a helpful way of reading Revelation? Why do you think it might be more helpful to read this chapter in its historical setting – at a time when Christians were being persecuted as followers of Christ?*
- *How might this chapter speak to us today? What might 'patient endurance and faithfulness' look like in Surrey in 2022? What do the dragon and the beasts look like in your situation?*
- *What are the monster-strategies that the dragon and the beasts are using to 'make war on the saints' (v.7) in your community? What about other parts of the world?*
- *What should we be looking out for? What counter-strategies might we deploy?*
- *Pete spoke about the need for 'a healthy scepticism towards dominant cultural norms'. What might that mean for you (and your family)? What are the 'Surrey gods' we need to be aware of – what demands your attention and seeks your worship?*
- *What might 'discernment' look like. Is gluing yourself to the road for the sake of the planet a useful strategy? When might civil disobedience be appropriate?*
- *How do we meaningfully renew our allegiance to Christ? What does that look like in 2022? (See the Wesley Covenant Prayer, below)*

"I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen."

¹ Or, as Pete Greig put it, "a ruthless and corrupt narcissist who will do anything to retain power"