**Beasts from the Sea and a Lamb on the Throne**

1. **Beasts in earlier Apocalyptic Writings: What and Why? (Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7)**

**Ezekiel 1: These animals are ‘living creatures’ *(hayyot*) and they are of heavenly origin. They’re part human, part animal, and are typical of Assyrian and Babylonian art, often called sphynxes, with the body of a lion, and the head of human. (You can see plenty of them in the Assyrian Gallery at the British Museum!) So they’re not new to Ezekiel. What *is* new is that there are four of them, and it’s the four *faces* which depict animal types: human, lion, ox and eagle. Note that they serve a mysterious figure on a sapphire throne, which is probably ‘God’, and note the light which glistens ‘like a bow’ around it. They are later called ‘cherubim’ in Ezekiel 10. So these are heavenly beings. They had a huge influence on the mystical Merkabah tradition in Jewish thinking, but that is another story!**

**What does it mean for Ezekiel? He was a priest in the Jerusalem Temple and had been forcibly exiled to Babylon. He found it hard to believe God could be present in an ‘unclean land’ and this vision, part of his call, is God’s way of showing him that heaven, where God dwells even more than in the Temple, is everywhere - even in Babylon. God is there with Ezekiel in exile.**

**Daniel 7: These four animals are bestial, terrifying, and their place is not in heaven but in the chaotic deep waters of the abyss known as Sheol, or hell. They could not be more different than Ezekiel’s cherubim. The first (7:4) is also a lion, as a figure of power and again popular in Babylonian art: think of those ‘winged lions’ guarding the Gates of Marduk in Babylon, which yu can see in the Berlin Museum! Then there is a bear (7:5) and a leopard with four heads (7:6) and then a beast (like a dragon?) with ten horns (7:7). These four beasts represent four kingdoms , and each kingdom was known at the time by the animal described: the lion is indeed Babylon, the bear is the Median Empire, the leopard is Persia and the dragon is Greece. These four Empires had each given the Jewish people much grief. This is followed by another kingdom, totally different, represented by a figure called the Ancient of Days’ sitting on a throne, a bit like the throne in Ezekiel but described in more detail. But by this throne we know we are now in heaven. This figure has clothing as white as snow, his throne and the wheels below it are like burning fire. Thousands serve him, and as they sit in judgement, ancient scrolls are opened: the fourth beast is destroyed. Then we see an angelic figure, described as one *like* a human being (7:13-14) and the Ancient of Days promises him, and his saints, a kingdom which cannot perish but will last for ever.**

**What does it mean for Daniel? At the time of writing the people were experiencing terrible persecution by a Greek ruler called Antiochus Epiphanes. He represents the dragon with ten horns in Daniel 7. He demanded everyone worshipped him as God, and those who refused – including many Jews - were killed for their disobedience. So we are shown how mighty empires come and go, and the Greek Empire under Antiochus will come to an end and God’s Kingdom will rule supreme.**

***Both these visions in Ezekiel and in Daniel show us in symbolic language the interplay between good and evil powers. The vision and language are called ‘apocalyptic’ because they unveil the purposes of God on earth. We might call each of them ‘protest literature’, from a small and persecuted people facing imperial power. This is what the Book of Revelation is also about…***

1. **Beasts in Revelation: What and Why? (Revelation 13 and 4)**

**Revelation 13: Here we see just one beast arising out of the sea, but it reminds us very much of what we’ve just read in Daniel 7. It has ten horns (verse 1) … but also seven heads. It is like a leopard, its feet are like a bear’s, and its mouth is like a lion’s (verse 2). It speaks like a dragon. It incorporates all those beasts in Daniel 7 into one. The whole earth follows and worships this beast (verse 3). It is evil in the extreme. And here is represents not the Greek Empire, but the Roman Empire, who under Nero and then under Domitian persecuted both Christians and Jews.**

**Revelation 4: Here we are shown an open door to heaven (verse 1). This vision is a combination of what we read in Ezekiel and in the latter part of Daniel 7; the figure is on a throne, although here is it blood-red, rather than white as in Daniel 7 (and Rev. 20:11-15). Note too a rainbow (verse 3). Here just 24 elders are in attendance: they represent both the 12 Apostles of the New Testament and 12 Patriarchs and Prophets of the Old Testament. Now notice the four living creatures (verses 7-8). One is like a lion, one like an ox, one has a human face, one is like a flying eagle. They remind us of those cherubim in Ezekiel, except they have 6 wings, not 4, and rather than moving multidimensionally with wheels, they have many eyes which enable them to see everywhere. These are the ones who sing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’, reminding us of the song in Isaiah 6.**

**What does all this mean? We see again, in esoteric symbolism, another battle between good and evil. Note that by the time of Revelation 13, with its terrible description of the beast, we see that evil has *not yet* been conquered. Note too that the four terrifying horsemen we looked at last week are in Rev. 6, one chapter later. So it means although we have a vision of God’s reign in heaven, it does not immediately work out on earth. The evil of the powerful Roman Empire continued: but we have assurance that the unseen Kingdom of God will one day break in on earth.**

1. **Why Jesus as the Lamb? (Revelation 5)**

**Revelation 5: This chapter comes as complete surprise. At the moment when a scroll is about to be opened, announcing the contents of God’s kingdom, we would expect the a further description of God on his throne, matching the powerful thrones of the Roman Empire. Instead we see a Lamb standing by this throne, with marks of having been slaughtered (verse 5). Yet this Lamb is the only one worthy to open the scroll (verse 9). Why this Lamb? This is such a reversal of power! Of course it’s intended to be Jesus, as he was known as the ‘Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world’ in the Gospel of John, and indeed he died on the cross as the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple. In Revelation 5 we have a real interplay between weakness and strength. Interestingly Jesus is first called the Lion of Judah (verse 5). But then the Lamb dominates. From now on, this figure of the Lamb comes a further 23 times throughout Revelation: see for example Rev. 6:1 and 7:9-10.**

**What does this mean? Firstly, it means that we have to *wait* for God’s kingdom to break in. Note that the four terrifying horsemen we looked at last week are in Rev. 6, the very next chapter! Secondly, it means that God’s kingdom will enter history in unexpected ways, as it did in the person of Jesus. God’s kingdom is not only about power but also about service, love, and sacrifice. It’s a kingdom with a crucified figure at the heart of it: this would have been anathema to the Romans. When Jesus died, it initially seemed that the power of Rome had won, deposing of the so-called Messiah of the Jews. Yet here in Revelation 5, in a difficult and highly symbolic vision, we see that the crucified *and risen* Jesus lies at the heart of the kingdom of God, and that this kingdom has a global reach - far beyond the power of Rome. So Revelation is protest literature indeed: it is about the mighty being put down and the meek raised up, as we read in the Magnificat.**

1. **Beasts, the Lamb, and Christ in Glory: What light does all this throw on our own Sanctuary Iconography?**

**I deliberately chose these five texts because each of them has indirectly or directly influenced the imagery here at St Barnabas.**

**Let’s look at the most obvious first: the image against the blue, starry background is of Pantokrator, or Christ in Glory. The rainbow, the fiery throne, the blue sky, the stars all take up themes from what we’ve read in Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation 4. Instead of the thousands or worshippers, as in Daniel, or 24 elders, as in Revelation, we now have 12 – actually 14 – figures standing below the firmament, in pairs. So the immediate effect of this imagery is to remind us that Christ is King, and his might and dominion can match any world power. But this is of course an image of what is present in heaven, not yet on earth: the reality of evil continues below.**

**But is there any depiction of evil here in the Apse? Surprisingly, nothing overt. The four beasts in Daniel 7 and the dragon in Revelation 13 are completely absent. Christ in Glory dominates our scene. Instead we see the four cherubim-like figures in Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4. They’re not by the heavenly throne, though: they appear as guardians from each side of the apse. Let’s take a look at all four of them. On the north side, we see a winged human figure up high, and another winged ox-like figure below. On the south side, we see a winged lion up high, and an eagle below. In Jewish tradition these four ‘cherubim’ would be the angels Michael (the lion), Gabriel (the eagle), Raphael (the human) and Uriel (the ox). (These angels are found in our mosaics high up on the north side.) Here in our Christian tradition, these cherubim-like figures have been transformed into Gospel writers! But which is which? There are at least six variations of which Gospel each of these android figures represent, but the most popular, proposed by both St Jerome and St Gregory, is as follows: the six-winged human figure stands for Matthew’s Gospel, because his book opens with a human genealogy; the six-winged ox is Luke (whose Gospel starts with the offering of animal sacrifices); the six-winged lion is Mark (whose Gospel begins with a voice ‘roaring’ in the wilderness); and the six-winged eagle is John (in John Chapter One we read of the divine word ‘coming down’ from heaven to earth). In some ways, this precise identification does not matter: it is enough that the Gospels together bear witness to what we see within the apse itself. The Gospels are thus the key to us understanding the Apocalypse.**

**So finally, we view the Lamb, immediately below the figure of Christ in Glory, and so contrasting with it, and immediately behind the crucifix on the altar, and so highlighting it. I have to confess I have a few issues with the fact that here the lamb is carrying a flag which, in the Middle Ages, alas, was a symbol of military power. Jesus the Lamb in Revelation 4 is not represented in this way. The 6c. ceiling mosaic in the Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna portrays a very different Lamb, mighty but more innocent, supported by four angels. Similarly the Lamb in the cycle of illustrations in the Carolingian Trier Apocalpyse is standing expectantly by the throne, with the seven seals under his front leg. The image in our apse is also very different from that extraordinary 15c Ghent altarpiece, ‘The Adoration of the Lamb’ where the Van Eyck brothers represent the Lamb standing serene on an altar with blood from his chest pouring into a chalice below. What we have, by contrast, is a lamb carrying a flagpole topped with a cross, reminiscent of the heraldry used when armies went out to fight their own wars on earth: one example is the 13c. English Trinity Apocalypse, and the flag is of St George. If we look at the 13c. Angers Apocalypse Tapestry, we’d see instead that the lamb’s flag bears the arms of the house of Anjou. After all I’ve said about the power of God confronting the power of men, the symbolism of the lamb carrying a flag associated with military power makes me uncomfortable, though it is a popular medieval trope.**

**This having been said, the flag is of the cross, albeit the cross of St George; and the Lamb is a symbol of sacrifice and suffering. This is made clear by the profusion of vine leaves and grapes surrounding it, symbolising the wine we drink which becomes for us the blood of Christ. Suffering and sacrifice dominate. (I personally just wish that flagpole, which has nothing at all to do with the depiction of the Lamb in Revelation, were not there!)**

1. Beasts, the Lamb, and Christ in Glory:

***So, finally, we need to ask - what was the art-architect Blomfeld intending to convey. with his assistants Heaton, Butler and Baine?***

***Firstly, we don’t have to have much knowledge of the latter part of nineteenth century history of Europe to realise the notion of*** ***Empire was central to the European idea of national identity, both within and outside Europe. So the message of Revelation with its emphasis on God’s kingdom overcoming the might of Human Empires would have been particularly relevant. This makes sense of the lamb with the flagpole indicating the interface between earthly powers and heavenly ones.***

 ***Secondly, we have to remember that this iconography set above and around the Baldacchino played an enormous role in the Tractarian movement from 1869 onwards. Only St Barnabas and St Thomas’s had vestments and a profusion of candles, and very few churches used incense and processions and the congregations rarely bowed and crossed themselves. This is not only a political statement, but a liturgical statement as well. The images of the four Gospels remind us of the central part of the Gospel in our liturgy of the Word. The image of Christ in Glory reminds us of that new song, ‘Holy Holy Holy’ from Isaiah 6, which we sing during the celebration of the Mass. And the image of the Lamb in all its vulnerability reminds us of John’s words about Jesus being the Lamb of God, which we sing or say together after the bread is broken. ‘Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy upon us…’***

***And what about its appropriateness today, not least during this season of Advent?***

***This depiction of Revelation 4 and 5 could not be more relevant after two years of pandemic, and now during the terrible atrocities resulting from the Russian/Ukrainian hostilities and now the Israeli / Gaza / Palestinian hostilities too. Many times we have been made to think of what it might be like to be caught up in a Third World War. So as in the 19c, the imagery in this apse reminds us of a different response to the power of military might. As we become increasingly aware of our impotence and vulnerability on a global level, we are reminded that there is another Kingdom, present but invisible, a kingdom not only of power and might but of sacrifice and service; a kingdom where there is a true regard for all humanity: all this is incredibly poignant and important at this point in time.***