



But let's focus now on today's theme – authority and conflict.

The Gospel reading was, of course a story taken from the events of Jesus ministry – near the beginning, but by linking it for us with a reading from the book of Revelation, those who devised our course of readings are inviting us to see this story of the healing of a demoniac, or madman, as something more than simply a dramatic cure on the human stage. We are asked to see it – and beyond it, all of Jesus' subsequent healings and deliverances, - as the historical outcroppings of a deep spiritual reality. And what is this reality? That there is a cosmic spiritual war going on between evil and goodness, between the devil and God; but, in Jesus, God has already won the war, though his people on earth are still subject to ongoing battles and many sufferings. Nevertheless, the fact is that in Jesus, the Word of God appeared on earth with ultimate authority and turned the tide in the spiritual war. Even though this is far from obvious to us now, it's what we're invited to believe; it's the heart of our faith.

Now, how do I get all this out of the coupling of the story of Jesus' cure of a possessed man in the synagogue at Capernaum with the weird passage from that even weirder book, the Revelation to John – a book so strange and puzzling, so violent and terrifying in parts – that some have thought (and still think) that it should have no place in the Bible. Even significant theologians, such as Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation, have held that we'd be better off without it. It's a book written to a large part in code, and though scholars can guess quite convincingly

at what that code meant to its author and first readers, , to most of us it's pretty impenetrable.

But today's passage about the woman clothed with the moon and the sun labouring to give a child destined to rule the nations, while a great monster dragon looks on, ready to devour the child is one where the scholars can help us understand what it meant to John and the church communities he addressed – and what it says about Jesus and his authority.

The churches which John addressed were small, fragile communities, experiencing persecution as the whole might of the Roman empire bore down on them.. They would have been familiar, from the images on the very coins they used, with the idea of the great and resplendent goddess, Roma, giving birth to a son – the emperor – who was destined to rule the whole world with his rod of iron. But in John's vision, the resplendent woman giving birth isn't Roma –Rome –(for she appears elsewhere in the visions as a very different woman - the great whore seated on seven hills – definitely the enemy. Here, by using biblical imagery, in conjunction with the imagery of Roman mythology, John is turning the ideology on its head. The woman in travail is Zion, the community of God's people – indeed Mary herself, pre-eminent among God's people, and maybe even personally remembered by some of the Christians he wrote to – if, indeed, she lived her later life and died in Ephesus, as legend says. The child being born is Christ himself – but also and in him, his brothers and sisters , the Christians who are suffering. Jesus, the Christ, is the one who has ultimate authority over evil – here symbolised in the traditional biblical image

of the serpent, the dragon, the great monster Leviathan who opposes God and is conquered. Jesus, the child brought forth is the one who will rouse the nations, but for the time being has been caught up to God and his throne: the dragon did not manage to devour or defeat him through all his life, even through his Passion and death. In fact, the reverse is true: they were the occasion of the decisive battle in which the devil was defeated. Meanwhile, while we await the fresh appearance of Christ from heaven, God's faithful people (symbolised, you remember in the woman) live in the wilderness, but are nourished by God. They mustn't despair – only wait, for the final unveiling of Christ in his authority and victory.

This passage from Revelation is then, a passage about Christ's authority – but it's also about conflict. There are forces which inevitably show themselves when Jesus' authority is exerted. We might call these forces 'the devil and his hosts', we might talk about 'the enemy', or we might prefer simply to call them the forces of evil. But whatever language we use, we know that they're real enough. Every news bulletin tells us so, and sometimes we experience them in our own daily walk, too..

Going back into the Gospel accounts of the healing or exorcism in the synagogue in Capernaum, we can see that this reveals him as someone whose authority astounded the people who heard him teach – and amazed them even more when he commanded the evil spirit to leave the sufferer, and suddenly it did. But not before there was conflict – the spirit cried out; it named and challenged Jesus; it made a great row and commotion. No doubt it was a frightening thing to behold, and perhaps most

frightening for the sufferer who was subject to, as well as the subject of, what was going on.

Some of us may prefer not to use the language of the driving out of spirits, but we can all resonate with the picture of a healer or doctor who walks in on a seemingly hopeless medical crisis, calmly takes charge, and works wonders and completely turns the situation around for the patient. Jesus is, and was, that healer, that teacher to the *n*'th degree. The one with undeniable authority. And his mission is to free human beings from the terrible slavery which evil forces impose. He came not so much to make us 'good' as to make us free; but free not so much in the sense of having a wide range of choices, but in the sense of the inner freedom to make the choices which will bind us to God, in whatever situation we're in.

Now, all may sound rather theoretical, rather super-spiritual. I'd like to end by telling you about some nuns I read about this week. They are Iraqi Catholics of the Dominican order; like most of their fellow Christians, they had to flee from the land which the Christian minority had historically called home for centuries, the area known as the plain of Nineveh, when ISIS took over. Some of the sisters exhibited great courage, even in their flight to Erbil – going back to fetch relatives and neighbours who had got left behind, even wheeling the elderly in hand-carts as ISIS closed in.

Now that ISIS has been defeated in that area, like other brave Christians they have returned. They have re-opened their schools, they have re-opened their maternity hospital. In their schools, where they educate young people of all

faith communities, they're putting an emphasis on helping the students have questioning minds – they're not instilling dogma – they're trying to help the young grow up able to question and analyse dogma, whatever its source. Their fight is against fundamentalism of any kind which brainwashes people into mental slavery with its great potential for evil. In their maternity hospital, which also serves all communities, they're nurturing new life – new hope, they like to think, for Iraq. But in both the schools and the maternity hospital there are staff who aren't Christian, some of whom support the sisters absolutely – but others of whom are obviously waiting for them to flee again – waiting for the small Christian community to give up the struggle to re-establish itself – waiting for them to go for good so that others can take over the institutions.

Yet, in this continually tense and difficult situation, Timothy Radcliffe, the former Master of the Dominicans who visited the sisters recently from England, found them full of joy, full of positivity, determined not to give up.

To me, that's a picture of the Christian community waiting in the desert, remembering terrible suffering, and liable perhaps to face more – yet nourished by God. Looking forward, keeping the faith, and acting out of the authority of Christ, as they seek to set people free.

The passage we heard from Revelation speaks of the child born to the woman clothed with the sun and moon, snatched up to heaven; when we think about Jesus, we know that that didn't happen to him straight away: he wasn't spared vulnerability and the woundedness, the

visitations of evil upon him. No – it was *through* his vulnerability and weakness upon the cross that God's decisive victory over the enemy, the deceiver, the dragon or serpent, was won. The Resurrection, the Ascension, are in effect, the fruits of that suffering.

We who also live in small and fragile Christian communities, albeit not in direct and obvious conflict with those around us, can offer God the weaknesses, accept the pain of what conflict we do experience – and put our faith in Christ's authority. In this way, we may be able to allow God the space to do his work in and through us., far beyond what we imagine to be possible..