

The Vision Thing

Are you prone to VISIONS? I don't mean ideas, or even good ideas. And I don't just mean dreams, at least not the ordinary kind of blurred slightly surreal dreams that you only half remember when you awake and can usually be traced to the events of the day before. I mean something that, waking or sleeping, comes at you out of the blue, sears itself upon your consciousness. Something, beside which everyday reality fades into a shadow, stops you in your tracks, freezes you in your shoes, interrupts your digestive processes. That sort of vision. That is what Daniel had; his vision had a direct physical effect. Read 7 28, 'I Daniel was deeply troubled by my thoughts and my face turned pale', 8 27 'I, Daniel, was exhausted, and lay ill for several days. Have you got 8.28. The I called unto King Belshazzar and begged that he send me his satraps bearing great vessels of aspirin and of hedex-extra, and flagons of water for me to consume the said analgesics, and yeah, it was done' (that verse is usually only printed in the apocrypha)

I have been asked to deal with Daniel 7 and 8, and they deal with two visions Daniel had. The first, in chapter 7 was in a dream - v.1. 'In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babyon Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying on his bed'. The second, in chapter 8, takes place in the third year of Belshazzar's reign; he has a vision, it does not say whether it was a dream. 'In my vision I saw myself in the Citadel of Susa in the province of Elam; in the vision I was beside the Ulai canal'.

Both visions are to do with seeing beasts, and they tie in quite closely with the New Testament Book of Revelation; there are all sorts of links. St John the Divine was clearly a Daniel fan, or perhaps a paperback version of Daniel was the only reading matter he found on the Isle of Patmos. . Read Daniel 7 2-8. 8 3-10.

What do you make of all this? It is all a bit like Revelation, which is on an even more epic scale. All three have horned beasts, with horns that sprout and grow other horns. Stop being pious **Can you take seriously**¹ anybody who has visions of horned beasts. Let me ask you straight, if someone came to you and said they had suddenly had a vision of horned beasts would you believe them? Would you give them any credence at all? Or would you say 'You just cannot be serious'....

Some people do take horned beasts seriously.. Last week a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses called to see me, and left me with a magazine, and lo and behold! In it I found an actual artist's depiction of one of these visions of horned beasts, here it is, it is a really jolly one to start with.. This is from Revelation - the beast with seven heads and ten horns, which should be scarlet although it is printed in black and white, turning on the Whore of Babylon, who used to ride it, but then they seem to fall out. A dramatic picture....

Visions are dramatic pictures - but the whole thing is they represent something, they need an interpretation. Almost everyone agrees that when Revelation was written, the Whore of Babylon was Rome, the global super power. But there is a long-established practise of double or triple-interpretation - a vision means one thing to one generation, it is equally valid to apply it to something else in the next. When I read the accompanying text I realised with a chill that these two nice civilised people, in their eyes, saw me as the Whore of Babylon - well, not me personally, but the Christian church, all believers except of course themselves (look at the picture; there are all sorts of churches in the background) - so that in talking with me, although polite and friendly, they were speaking to the Whore of Babylon.... So I suggest that next time they knock on your door, .cut the introductions and pussyfooting around, be honest, when they say 'Hi there, we're Bill and Cheryl, you can respond 'Hi, and I'm the Whore of Babylon'..... (Ladies, you

¹Cue for head of stuffed impala (wearing Santa Claus hat) to appear in middle of curtains, and stare briefly at congregation before withdrawing

might like to dress appropriately, it's all there in Revelation, you know, purple and scarlet and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls) Then you have established your parameters, everyone knows where everyone stands right from the beginning, and a constructive and meaningful dialogue may blossom forth.

Back to Daniel. Daniel's visions all mean something, and thankfully they are explained - in part at least, at the time. In the first one, he obviously sees other onlookers watching the beasts as well, and he approaches one of them and asks what it is all about - he is told the beasts are kingdoms, and the sprouting horns symbolise kings. However horrible and terrible they are, they will all come crashing down in the end. The saints, the people of the Most High, whatever they suffer at the hands of them, will be eventually be vindicated. God will win. In the second vision, the ram and the goat having a head-to-head, Gabriel is sent to explain things to Daniel; the ram is the kingdom of the Medes and the Persians, the goat Greece; he also gives much greater detail about a stern-faced king who causes astounding devastation, who will stand against the Prince of princes, and will be destroyed, though not with human power. Most commentators see this as Antiochus Epiphanes, who dies on his sick bed.

All these visions thus relate to power politics of the last days of the Old Testament, a period of which there is a lot more in the Apocrypha than actually in our Bible. And, as Jono said, scholars have been divided on whether Daniel was written in the 6th century BC, and spoke very accurate prophecies (especially apparently chapter 11 which we will get to in due course?) or in the 2nd century BC, which makes them retrospective prophecies. This is quite a nice idea - I do not have a gift for proper prophecy, but retrospective ones I feel I could have a go at.... There are lots of arguments here, not just the sceptics' one that prophecies are a lot easier to make after they have been fulfilled. I won't get into that.

But the visions are not just about crashing empires and the rise and fall of kings, and predictions and/or retrospectives whether they simply relate to past or present history, Anthiochus Ehiphanus or Hitler or George Bush, They are, or will be, dead, buried and forgotten, or at least only remembered by historians or people telling stories to scare children into good behaviour. There are other things in there, which outlast the rest. Go to 7.13, and it is as if Daniel suddenly sees through and beyond the screen on which he is being shown this zoological video-nasty. 'In my vision I looked and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven' (read rest of 13/14). Suddenly, crash, splinter, and we step through into another world; we are into the New Testament, and here is title Jesus took for himself and the actual heart or kernel of what Christianity is about. The coming king beyond all kings, eternally human and eternally divine, the face in which we see God the eternal and the infinite, and the God beside-us God-the-companion God-wearing flesh.

I want to return to the whole subject of visions. Visions, with or without horned beasts, are dramatic, disturbing, and very effective ways for God to challenge and affect our human thinking and behaviour. We all need visions. The Old Testament sums it up 'without a vision the people perish'. If you have never seen anything your eyes can't see you are dead....OK?

But we have got to be careful with visions; that is just the way visions are. There may be lots or elements in them we just cannot understand - look at the mysterious numbers and periods Daniel keeps citing. 7.25 the saints are handed over to the evil king for a time, times and half a time....

I like this one. Do you enjoy singing scriptural choruses?

There will be time, times and half a time

Time, times and half a time

Time, times and half a time

He who is wise knows what this means...

Then we have 8 14; the temple will be reconsecrated after 2,300 evenings and mornings. Later on

there are more numbers. Commentators seem completely puzzled by them, even with 2000 of years hindsight. Or there may be elements we can misinterpret, or twist to suit our own ends, maybe like the JWs with their identification of the Whore of Babylon. There is very little in this world that cannot be twisted and misused, we are that talented at twisting and misuse... but that cannot deny the power and efficacy of visions. Have you ever had a vision?

I think we all need visions. The **basic one** for a Christian is seeing, like Daniel, the Son of Man ; when the fact dawns on you that Jesus is what it is all about, the one in whom all things fall into place, the hand to hold as you leap into the dark. There are a thousand ways of putting it, some help some people and some help others. There are lots of theories, and lots of people who will debate how Scriptural each one is, but one reality, one Truth, behind them all. That is the basic vision, level one, that makes you reorientate your life, to turn round.

Here is a vision - a dramatic and striking picture that means something -illustrating that one, seen through the eyes of a Victorian melodramatist - a window at Low Dinsdale church near Darlington. A few years ago it would have been simply seen as a period piece of crashing Victoriana, but you can both enjoy the image and unpack it; Jesus lie, death and resurrection, symbolised by the cross, is the one thing to hold on to when your world, personal or actual, falls apart...

But there are other levels of vision. The **second level** is the one that drives you in your own life; the seeking the vision that is God's way for you, the individual. If meeting or realising Jesus is the basic individual vision, this is maybe the directional individual vision This may be sudden and clear, what I call the 'Go to Bognor' kind (OHP) but I suspect that more often it is a little more subtle; it delivers the motivation, the impetus to get up and go, but not necessarily the rail ticket to the final destination. I am not good at wearing my heart on my sleeve, but I have had a vision, or a vision-of-sorts (I don't want to sound like Martin Luther King). It happened a couple of years ago now, but has still not clarified into an actual direction. It just sits there, glowing, on the shelf, awaiting the right time. There is something else, something new, maybe some other place....

Churches of course have visions as well, **collective visions** for a whole bunch of people, a major factor in drawing them together. If you see this vision, stay with us, be envisioned people, a force in mutual cohesion, an impetus to mutual direction. Jesus is of course, as I have said, both the basic individual and the collective vision - the common Christian goal to make the world a bit more as he would like it to be. But individual churches and groups of Christians have group visions as well. Where we ought to be going ,what we ought to be doing. If you hare that goal, you stay, if not, you maybe look somewhere else where. Visions like this can be misused, for instance if a powerful leader uses heavy techniques to force his vision on others, so they get a vision secondhand as it were. He (it is usually a he) might even use a real or imagined vision as a means of asserting his own power, under the guise of commitment to God. Stepping Stones has a vision, Jono in particular is good at spelling that out. It is a good vision; the last thing I would want to do from this metaphorical pulpit is to criticise that. But we all have our individual visions as well, which hopefully overlap with the collective vision of the church we happen to be in, but **need not necessarily be quite the same**. If they did not overlap to some extent, we would not be here at all. At the moment Elaine and I are in a state of not being quite sure; we've got a vision that is a bit like a helium balloon, bumbling round the ceiling, but maybe we should take hold of its string and open the window as well, to see if it might take us somewhere. So, if you haven't heard, we are going to be taking a sabbatical for a while; as we told the caretakers, we may be back in six months, refreshed, or maybe missionaries in Borneo. God knows, I trust he may let us be privy to his plans.

That is a personal note, not one to end on. Back to Daniel and a recap.

Vision - essential to life and motivation, in fact without Vision there is no life at all. The people perish

Vision - often confusing, open to interpretation and misinterpretation. Who really is the Whore of Bablyon? This week's poll suggests..

Vision - to motivate your thoughts and actions, mind, soul, body and feet

Vision - for a Christian, don't worry too much about the horned beasts, the basic individual vision is Jesus, the Son of Man and Son of God, the mystery to tongue-tie theologians, that we live in and with and by and for, and in the end becomes all our eyes will ever want or need to see. **The one vision after all the others fade.**

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