

Principalities and Powers

Readings: Colossians chapter 2 verses 8-15; Luke chapter 10, verses 1-3; 17-20

Today is St Georges Day – the patron Saint of England. And not just of England; but of Catalonia, Lithuania, Palestine, Portugal, Germany, Greece plus five other countries. And he wasn't even English!! Born in Turkey he joined the Roman army, protested against Roman persecution of Christians and was tortured and imprisoned for his beliefs.

Just about everything we know of him is the stuff of myth and legend. Including slaying the dragon. Yet myth and legend are powerful means of story-telling and one way of expressing Truth. The early Chapters of Genesis which describe creation and the Garden of Eden are mythological. Yet who is to say they are not true? They are theologically true in a way that prosaic prose can never adequately express. Nor are we surprised to find the New Testament full of mythology. Which is why we read Paul's Letter to Christians at Colossae. Paul spoke of "...the elemental spirits of the universe" and said that Christ on His Cross "...disarmed the principalities and powers" triumphing over them.

The fact is that, until the scientific revolution of the 16th Century, people believed that the universe was populated by a host of unseen powers including astrological powers which had a controlling influence over people's lives. These powers were personified and they were real. So we sang John Bunyans hymn, written in 17th Century where he wrote of "...hobgoblins and foul fiends" being unable to daunt the Christian. And the idea of supernatural forces is still around.. Many newspapers till carry a page entitled "What the stars foretell". The High Priest of modern astrology Russel Grant still has a following and even his inept performance of Strictly Come Dancing hasn't dented his popularity!

Before we write all this off as superstitious baloney lets not throw the baby out with the bathwater. For there are forces at large in the world which influence and control our behaviour. We don't personify them as people did in the past but they are for real. There are Principalities and Powers let loose in our world and we ought not to pretend otherwise. All I want to do is identify a couple of them.

Racism is one. The idea that some races are inherently superior to others. You even find it in the Bible! The whole structure of Apartheid in South Africa was built around a theology based on what happened to Noah after the Flood where Noah was found naked in a drunken stupor and his son Canaan was blamed. As a result Noah cursed Canaan and said that he and his descendants would forever be enslaved as hewers of wood and drawers of water. Black people were identified as Canaan's sons. Centuries later Hitler envisaged a blond-haired Aryan 'master race' and plunged the world into war to achieve it. Nor is racism a dead issue. It is alive and well in today's world.

Classism is another. It affects huge numbers of people. In India the Untouchables are a class of people still subject to discrimination even though it has been outlawed! And Britain is, even today, riven by 'class' distinctions. The Labour Party still promotes itself as the Party of the "working class" and the Conservatives are still labelled as "toffs".

Market Forces is yet another Unseen Power. It was Margaret Thatcher who famously pronounced "You can't buck the market" when the Government was concerned at pegging back the high price of the Pound. The price of everything is determined by Supply and Demand pressures and the ordinary man in the street is at the mercy of economic forces which he can't control.

You can probably name a few more Unseen Powers operative in our world today. We don't personify them but that doesn't make them less real. And it is against this background that we hear the words of Paul. Christ has disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them. Paul uses the current imagery of the day when a Roman general, returning from a war vic-

torious, paraded into Rome on a white warhorse, preceded by the manacled and shackled prisoners taken in the conflict and now to be sold as slaves.

And the relevance today? It is the Church, defined as the Body of Christ, which should be seen as triumphing over the 'dragons', the 'principalities and powers' which plague our world.

And I have seen this happen. I was a Minister in Rhodesia at the time when racism and classism were rife in society. And it was in the Church that these 'dragons' were confronted. The most moving moments came when we celebrated Holy Communion. In defiance of the Government we insisted that all were welcome no matter what colour or class and there was something special about giving out the Bread and the Wine to a black woman who worked as a domestic servant and, next to her, knelt a white man who was a high executive in the Anglo-American corporation. In that moment the words of Paul became a reality. "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek" and that nailed the power of nationalism and racism. "In Christ there is neither slave nor free" and that nailed the power of classism. And 'market forces' were challenged in the payment of a living wage and decent working conditions for those who were powerless to influence them.

But these dragons are still alive and kicking today. A change of Government and Africans coming to power in Zimbabwe has not made things better. In fact they are a lot worse. And not just in Zimbabwe. They are alive and well in Britain today and in fact, world-wide. Our job as Christians is to slay the dragons and fight until the Kingdom of this world becomes the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.