

Revelation 12: 1-5a

The Woman and the Dragon

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems on his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of the heaven and threw them to earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and his throne.

Note for Preachers:

In traditional thought, this female figure is often identified with the Virgin Mary, the son being Jesus. This can therefore be interpreted as an eternal prophecy both fulfilled already and still be fully realised. Alternatively, the woman may represent Israel, with the twelve tribe as the jewels in her crown; it is Israel's sufferings which bring forth the Messiah. The elements in the passage call upon a range of influences including Jewish, Greek and Persian, and the subsequent verses, which are not included in this reading, introduce other elements.

Whatever the method of interpretation, the presence of the 'great red dragon' or 'serpent' signifies an evil force, in Jewish tradition and in both Greek and near eastern mythology. In apocalyptic style, this passage is about temporal suffering and ultimate victory, and stresses that the fight will be hard and vicious. It has much to say today, first in terms of sustaining those Christians in situations where the beast is as identifiable and terrible as in this picture. But mostly it challenges a complacency which celebrates a victory already won, without the need to address the issues of evil which beset us.