



# THE DEAN and the DRAGONS

A SERIES OF FIVE SERMONS  
BY  
VERNON CORNISH



# THE DEAN AND THE DRAGONS



A SERIES OF FIVE SERMONS  
PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL,  
PERTH,  
during  
LENT 1976



By  
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## INTRODUCTION

April 1976

Dear Reader,

*This booklet is in the nature of an experiment. For some years, a few friends have urged that I should publish a collection of sermons. I must admit that I have some serious doubts as to whether there really is a market for such commodities in Australia today, but at least it's worth a try!*

*The series of "dragon" sermons was preached as a Lenten Series within a few weeks of my arrival in Perth to take up my appointment of Dean of St. George's Cathedral.*

*The booklet is dedicated to the many patient hearers of the Word that have shared with me the adventure of preaching the faith down the years of my ministry. In particular I must thank my wife Dell for her constant encouragement and kindly criticism!*

Yours sincerely,

Vernon Cornish.

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## INTRODUCTION

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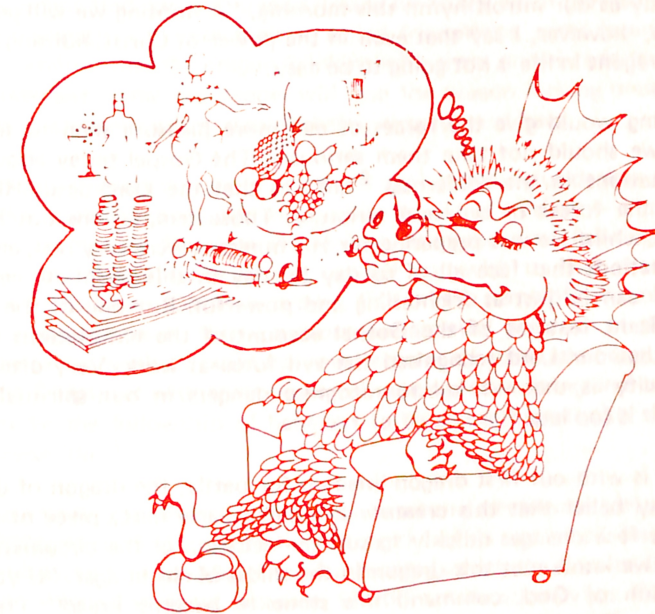
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## 1



## THE DRAGON OF DESIRE



## THE DRAGON OF DESIRE

I'm glad you've come to join our hunting expedition for dragons. And I want to warn you that our expedition will not be altogether easy. We know that dragons do not like to be disturbed. And of course, we all know that dragons would not be very enthusiastic about a Cathedral congregation that honours a saint whose legendary fame is based on the slaying of such a creature.

But because you and I are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we know already that the dragons of evil have been defeated by the power of the Cross and Resurrection. We know that victory will not be denied those who carry the Sword of the Spirit,<sup>1</sup> the helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness.

So there's a sense in which we start our adventure together knowing what the end of the story will be. Perhaps we should have sung confidently as our introit hymn this morning, "A hunting we will go . . ." Again, however, I say that even in the power of Christ, hunting down evil dragons in life is not going to be easy.

Nothing would give the forces of evil more pleasure than to suggest that we should not take them seriously. The Gospel today about the temptations in the wilderness<sup>2</sup> affirms that the Lord Jesus Himself took the forces of evil very seriously. Those temptations out in the desert whilst He was preparing for His ministry were very real, and the temptations that face all of us day by day in this twentieth century world can be just as frightening and powerful. But one of the most significant features of the Gospel account of the temptations is the fact that our Lord recognised the evil force at work. Very often our difficulty is that we fail to recognise dangers in our spiritual lives until it is too late.

So it is with our first dragon lined up for battle, the dragon of desire. It's my belief that this creature is a particularly nasty piece of work, whose face changes quickly to suit the occasion or the circumstances. Jesus we know met this dragon in the midst of His hunger. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread". Physical hunger, physical desire — that is not a bad thing in itself. None of us would hesitate to feed a hungry person after this great act of worship. Indeed, if the situation were desperate, we would feed them here and now.

The temptation for the Christ was to overcome physical need by a selfish, wrong use of divine powers. "Man shall not live by bread alone." is his answer to us. The spirit world and the physical world each have a proper place in the scheme of God's world — and the desire to satisfy hunger only becomes dragon-like when it destroys the spirit of a person.

How do WE meet this clever slimy dragon of wrongful desire in our world? We have not been fasting out in the desert for forty days. We cannot be tempted in the same way as the Son of God was. That is true.

The dragon of wrongful desire I can assure you, however, does not live out on the Nullarbor! The dragon of wrongful desire lives I'm afraid, my dear people, in our suburban streets. From time to time he lives in our hearts and minds, and he can find a home with us whatever age we might happen to be.

If you want to learn to recognise his nasty grin, you'll find he changes scales to suit our temperaments, our moods or our situation. The children might find this nasty old beast the next time they eat too much at a party, some parents might recognise the beast in themselves when they next wish to dominate their children's thinking, some teenagers might find the old dragon licking his chops when they allow their sexual appetites to rule their so-called friendships, some businessmen will certainly find the dragon drinking with them on the road to regular drunkenness, some old people will find the dragon lurking under their many possessions which they feel they simply must have.

The best weapon to use in the fight against wrongful desires is quite traditional, my friends. We must enlist the aid of a Prince — and for us, there can be only One true Prince who strengthens our fainting hearts. Come into the presence of the Lord if you wish to beat the dragon down to its knees. Come in prayer. Call on the name of Jesus over and over again. Come to this wondrous sacramental presence at the altar rail week by week to build up your reserves of spiritual energy. Come to the Scriptures with their powerful message of warning and comfort. Come to the fellowship of believers to be strengthened with might in the inner life.<sup>3</sup>

But come to your Prince with a clear heart and a calm mind. Have your thinking, as well as your feelings straight in this matter of desire. For it is important to use the gifts of reasoning which the Creator God has given to us all in some measure. If you are to allow your Prince to defeat the Desire Dragon, you must first recognise that the body is not evil in itself. The Christian faith, of all the great religions of the world, tries to make this abundantly clear. Indeed the Christian faith is founded on the great central truth that God became man. We cry with joy in the Creed that Christ was born of the Virgin Mary. God who made us, God who became like us in every way except for sin,<sup>4</sup> this God has not put us into a shell of flesh to destroy us. We have been promised that God will not allow us to be tempted above that we are able to accept,<sup>5</sup> and we have been assured that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>



The body then is a controllable unit in life. We accept that we will have cravings on occasions to satisfy our physical appetite, that is part of being a person. But it's only a part. We who have been made in the image of God <sup>7</sup> are both thinking and choosing beings. Service to God involves the will and intellect as well as our affections. The most exciting thing about our Prince of Love is that He leads us on to defeat dragons of evil BY OUR OWN CHOICE. We are not forced into battle. We have to put on the armour of discipline ourselves in His strength.

He who knows us so much better than we know ourselves <sup>7</sup> will help us to arm for the fight when we next come into contact with the Desire Dragon. On the one hand He will strengthen us by His demand for obedient discipline; on the other, he will support us by His compassionate understanding. It was our Prince who said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away . . . if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better you lose one of your members than your whole body got to hell." <sup>8</sup>

To balance this picture of desperate discipline, He also said to the religious leaders who brought to Him a woman who had been overwhelmed by wrongful desire in an act of adultery. "Let him who is without sin among you be first to throw a stone at her." <sup>9</sup>

Jesus knew that the dragon of desire will always be defeated by true love and real discipline. May it always be so in our lives.

1. Ephesians Chapter 6, v 13 to v 17.
2. Luke, Chapter 4, v 1 to v 13.
3. Ephesians, Chapter 3, v 16.
4. Hebrews, Chapter 4, v 15.
5. 1 Corinthians, Chapter 10, v 13.
6. 2 Corinthians, Chapter 6, v 16.
7. Compare 1 Corinthians Chapter 13, v 12.
8. Matthew, Chapter 5, v 27 to v 30.
9. John, Chapter 8, v 7.

The scripture readings which were set down for the Holy Communion Service were —

Old Testament lesson, Deuteronomy Chapter 6, verses 10 to 17.  
 New Testament lesson, Hebrews Chapter 4, verses 12 to 16.  
 The Gospel, St. Luke's Chapter 4, verses 1 to 13.



## THE DRAGON OF INTOLERANCE



## THE DRAGON OF INTOLERANCE

The dragon of intolerance is a most peculiar creature. We all know that he exists. We have all met him often down the years.

But if you think carefully, you will probably have to admit that you have usually seen this dragon in the distance. Very seldom I think are we able to recognise those vile features of intolerance when the creature comes close to home. So that, the further away the dragon of intolerance appears to be, the plainer are his features. The closer we come to try to track him down in our hunting expedition, the more difficult it will be to find him.

Think of it in your own experience. I'll try you out with a few words to see if you react to the influence of the dragon.

First word test — Northern Ireland. There you are, of course you can see him. A nasty vicious piece of work if ever there was. Christian against Christian in a feud reaching back over the centuries of religious bigotry. Of course, we all know that it's not just simply a matter of Roman Catholic and Protestant rivalry. We acknowledge that there are elements of economics and power involved as well. But we have to admit sadly as we shake our religious heads together this morning that intolerance reigns supreme in the hearts of many people who live in that beautiful country.

Second word test — The Middle East. There he is again! No longer dressed in soft Irish green, the dragon now has taken on the colour of the sand as it blows between the camps of refugees of racialism. The home of the Founder of our faith, the little nation of Israel is threatened on all sides as it struggles to maintain its right to some territory. And just as tragically, the tent villages of the displaced Palestinian Arabs are a witness to the fact that some innocent people have been driven away from the place they had believed to be their home. Oh yes, the dragon is having a field day there at present devouring scores of victims day by day.

Well, having proved your long distance viewing ability, I suspect that the time has come to take out our special dragon detectors — because the closer he comes to home, the more difficult we will find it to see him. Or at least I find that this is true of my own experience. I certainly need spiritual spectacles to enable me to get the dragon in focus here close at hand.

When I put on these spectacles, however, I find that I am able to look with far greater honesty and bravery at Australian society. As long as we keep on looking with courage, we will always be able to catch glimpses of the reality of intolerance twitching its tail or puffing some smoke around.

I personally remember seeing it very clearly about twenty years ago on the outskirts of a township in the "outback" where the aboriginal people lived in a shanty gunya-type village on the banks of the river away from the white man's houses. I have seen it in the treatment of young men in boarding school, where it always paid to be big rather than little. I have heard it in debates broadcast from Federal Parliament where political parties in power tend to treat other viewpoints with contempt. I have been surprised to feel the dragon's influence even in old people's homes where residents have said that they have no time for the so-called long-haired "louts" of today. I have been equally surprised to recognise the same attitudes of rejection in the comments by high school youngsters about the moral standards of the "old squares" of previous generations.

Occasionally, when I have really been very honest, I've known the shadow of the dragon of intolerance to fall across many church people as he wanders the world seeking whom he can devour.<sup>1</sup>

The strangest thing occurs on such occasions, for I have come to realise that the dragon can use different voices to make his views known — and at first hearing such views sound almost reasonable. "Oh well, we have to look after ourselves first you know, charity begins at home" . . . "Of course, they're High Church!" . . . "Actually that lot's Low Church" . . . "I'll cancel my pledge if you agree to that, Rector" . . . "We can't stand modern services" . . . "We can't stand old-fashioned services" . . . "As long as you go to church three times a year and live by the Sermon on the Mount, you can be as good a Christian as anyone!"

How comforting it is to know that Jesus our Lord also met dragons of intolerance throughout the whole of his earthly ministry. It won't make it any easier for us sometimes, but at least there is a New Testament pattern which gives us a chance to escape.

Think of his confrontation with the Pharisees over the question of Beelzebub, the prince of devils.<sup>2</sup> The religious leaders claimed that it was only by this means that Christ had power over evil. The supreme insult to the Son of God was to identify Him with this source of wickedness. The Pharisees in their blind hatred of One with power to heal were prepared to use every dirty tactic of intolerance in their battle against our Lord. Name-calling I suppose is pretty low down on the list of weapons that can be used in waging a war of intolerance — nevertheless, name-calling can be hurtful. Our Lord in His complete identification with us,<sup>3</sup> His complete humanity, would have been grievously hurt by the accusation that He was an agent of evil.



His response in this situation is a clue for our response to intolerance when we recognise it in others, or even when we catch ourselves being chewed up by the dragon. He reasons with those who made the false accusation. He treats them with courtesy in spite of their treatment of Him. He accepts their name-calling as indicating a problem on their part, and He tries to answer them in a way in which they will understand and accept. Then, having tried to answer their objections in a careful and forthright manner, the Lord goes on firmly to try to teach a few lessons about the real nature of the search for truth under the guidance of the Spirit of God.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus says, "I tell you this. No sin, no slander is beyond forgiveness for man, except slander spoken against the Spirit, and that will not be forgiven."

Our Lord knew that it was the Spirit of God which directed His life, so that the judgment of the Pharisees simply was an indication of their own hopeless spiritual state of bankruptcy. They had become so blind that they were unable to speak good things, they were so intolerant that they were prepared to call "goodness" exactly the opposite.

So of all the dragons that we will meet in life, our adversary today is one of the most dangerous. Our Lord and Master has again, however, won the day! He has again calmed our fears. In the spirit of loving forgiveness He has promised to accept us, He has promised to heal us from our intolerant blindness.

I suppose it's true to say that no eye specialist would tell us to look into the burning light of the sun to be cured of a lack of vision. But that is the Gospel's advice to defeat the dragon of intolerance. Look into the light of the Son of God. Only if we turn away from Him will we be lost. Only if we deliberately turn our backs on what we know to be true will we be beaten.

If we look on Him, then we will know ourselves and others. The light will be so beautiful and dazzling that it will frighten intolerance away. Praise God!

1. 1 Peter Chapter 5, v 8.
2. Matthew Chapter 12, v 22 to v 32.
3. Philippians Chapter 2 v 8.
4. Matthew Chapter 12, v 31.

The scripture readings which were set down for Holy Communion Service were —  
 Old Testament: Isaiah Chapter 35, v 1 to v 10.  
 New Testament: 1 John Chapter 3, v 1 to v 8.  
 Gospel: St. Matthew, Chapter 12, v 22 to v 32.

## 3



## THE DRAGON OF SUFFERING



## THE DRAGON OF SUFFERING

The dragon of suffering can be a very frightening creature indeed. It must be admitted that sometimes he looks very fierce. It must also be admitted with sadness that some people do not ever overcome his vicious attacks on the body, the mind or the spirit.

It's my opinion that we can meet this frightening producer of pain almost anywhere and at almost any time in life. I myself have seen him at his worst as I have watched at hospital bedsides where good people have had to grapple with the reality of pain, towards the end of a fight against a terrible disease. I have seen the dragon raging in fury up and down the ranks of mourners at a funeral service, especially the funeral services of young accident victims or the funeral service for a tiny new-born babe. Certainly we know that the dragon of suffering can be at some moments in some lives a most dreadful foe.

On the other hand, there are some very unusual features about this dragon that we are to fight in the power of Christ. For one thing, he is the first of our violent creatures of evil that we have met this Lent who is likely to be locked away in the manner of a household pet. Believe it or not, my friends, but there are people in this city — indeed I suppose there are people in every urban community in the world — who can become strangely attached to this agent of evil. Some people simply glory in having the dragon of suffering locked up in their own houses or in their own minds.

I recall a lady who produced the dragon from her bookcase of widowhood when I called in the course of parish visiting. The dragon leapt out from the past with the accompaniment of sighs and groanings of the spirit. The creature had been thriving there for years, gorging himself on the loneliness of one old woman who could not forgive God for the loss of her loved husband. The dragon had made a mess of her life, and she looked a pathetic soul in the midst of her grief.

So we do not underestimate the power of the dragon of suffering. He can destroy, destroy, destroy to such a degree that this century has seen the horror of prison camps like Belsen, atomic warfare at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and now gang attacks on innocent passers-by in the great cities of the world.

Yet this dragon, like all other dragons of evil, can be beaten — as long as we use different methods to those we have used in our fight against desire or intolerance. It is still true to say that we will be strengthened by the sword of the Spirit, of course the light of Christ will show us the way, but the best method of overcoming this dragon is to tame it in the right way. We should certainly not feed it with self-pity, sorrow or

grief — that will make it nastier than ever. We must feed it with a potion of love and courage every day. Just a few drops, my friends, three times after meals — and there will be a remarkable change. We will find that instead of a terrible monster we will have a magnificent lion-like creature of courage.

Our secular world would like to suggest that the age of miracles is dead. The taming of dragons of suffering goes on every day of the week, doesn't it? Think for a moment of your own experience.

Let me give you one example from my own knowledge. I think of a strong, dominant woman who had become famous for her leadership and determined words down the years. Suddenly struck down by cancer, her gracious acceptance of terrible pain was inspiring. Life went on in her household no matter what. Even as the disfigurement of face and body came on steadily over the years, always there was the dignity of personality. Always there was a care for clothes and appearance, a welcoming smile, love and care for the family, and faith in God. The dragon of suffering had arrived in fierce mood in that house, but was gradually converted into a beauty that took the breath away. Far from destroying, it seemed to many of us that suffering had softened an already striking person into one whose courage was superb.

I thank God for having known that woman, for having seen her witness to Christ, for having seen the courage of her family. I doubt if I could have quite understood courage in pain without such a lesson.

And yet I shouldn't have been surprised, should I? The conquest of suffering is after all at the heart of the Gospel. It is part of the mystery of the coming of our Lord into His own world, that world which knew of the coming of our Lord into His own world, that world which knew of the coming of our Lord into His own world (St. Luke, Him not. <sup>1</sup> In the passage set down for the Gospel today (St. Luke, Chapter 9, v 18 to v 27) Jesus makes it plain that the climax of his earthly ministry is to be intimately linked with suffering. "The Son of Man has to undergo great sufferings, and to be rejected by the elders, chief priests and doctors of the law, to be put to death and to be raised again on the third day".

That quotation from the teaching of Jesus is interesting in that he takes some care to classify the manner of suffering which He Himself was to endure in order to achieve God's purposes. There was to be on the one hand rejection, and on the other death. If we had to sum up what are the most frightening possibilities in the world of suffering, I suppose that there we have two spectres that sometimes have haunted the most thinking people. Christ the Lord was to suffer rejection at the hands of the very people who should have known the truth. Christ the Lord was to pass through the valley of death on His way to glory.



His human reaction of such a challenge is one which we can all understand only too well. We see Him in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of this double ordeal of rejection and death, and His prayer rings down the centuries to us in its powerful pattern. "Father, everything is possible for You. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as You, not I, would have it." <sup>2</sup>

The perfect humanity of the Christ would no more search for suffering than we do. It is natural for us to wish to reject rejection, and it is natural for us to be uneasy about the great unknown that faces us in the adventure of death. But how superb to see in our Lord the way through both. He thinks not of Himself when the time of trial and ordeal finally comes on that ghastly crucifixion morning. He thinks of others.

Of course He was aware of the reality of the driving nails and the forceful spear. Of course he felt the thorns crushing down on his blood-soaked crown. But His prayer was that His persecutors should be forgiven for ignorance.

It is our good fortune that we live at a time when it is possible to grasp something of the significance of the Gospel in a way in which those first-century citizens of Jerusalem could not comprehend. For we now know that the victory of the Resurrection could not have been achieved without the sacrificial love and courage shown forth on that little hill of Calvary.

It was the forgiving Lord who overcame rejection to such a degree that He won a dying thief to His cause, <sup>3</sup> and it was the Suffering Servant <sup>4</sup> who broke through the barrier of death to become the Risen Christ. One is intimately linked with the other.

The Crucifix and the plain Cross each have an honoured place in our great Christian traditions for that very reason. There is a very real sense in which they show forth the two sides of the Christ coin.

Yes, my friends. The dragon of suffering will come to you again one day. Do not be dismayed. Rather rejoice, for it will be your chance to follow our Lord to victory.

1. John Chapter 1, v 10.

2. Luke Chapter 22, v 42.

3. Luke Chapter 23, v 43.

4. Isaiah, Chapter 53, v 7 to v 9.

The scripture readings set down for Holy Communion were —

Old Testament: Isaiah Chapter 45, v 18 to v 25.

New Testament lesson, Colossians Chapter 1, v 24 to v 29.

The Gospel, Luke, Chapter 9, v 18 to v 27.

## 4



## THE DRAGON OF FEAR



## THE DRAGON OF FEAR

For those of you who are visiting our Cathedral this morning for the first time in Lent, I must explain that the rest of us have been having a very busy time in recent weeks in hunting dragons. The creature that we are out to defeat today is a very sneaky one indeed, who pops up from the most unexpected places at the most unexpected times. He is the dragon of fear.

This dragon I think is himself rather a neurotic type, for he is never still. He keeps jumping in and out of life like a jack-in-the-box. He is always making loud noises to impress the unwary. He sometimes seems terribly large, but at other times he just hops about like a grass-hopper letting us know that he is there — but not giving us too much trouble.

He is one dragon that has a particular liking for little people, although he is happy to frighten anyone that will listen to his bellowing. There is nothing that gives the dragon of fear more satisfaction than to rear its ugly face in the midst of the night in the children's bedroom, accompanied by strange noises or dancing shadows. He quite enjoys teenagers for breakfast as well, for he thrives on youngsters who worry themselves sick about the awful business of trying to keep up with everyone else. You know the sort of thing I mean. I reckon that the dragon of fear has a real feast every day in the school rooms of Perth, where white-faced children strive to cope with life.

Perhaps this dragon could even get a job at a modern circus, for I believe that he has so many clever little tricks that he could bluff himself into anything. There's nothing for instance he likes more than chasing irresponsible politicians up and down the corridors of power to force them to shout fierce-sounding slogans. There's nothing he enjoys more than sensational treatment of news items by desperate sub-editors determined to sell their afternoon editions. He delights in stirring up mobs of people with a fleeting appearance at meetings of students or unionists. And if he can even use the passions of football enthusiasts determined to see their side win, then he really feels happy.

But his cleverest act by far is the one in which he jumps into our minds. That's where he feels most at home. There he doesn't have to use old-fashioned methods of smoke, fire and noise. There he chews away steadily in the manner of a dog with a bone. He does not easily give in, he keeps on grinding his teeth in determined fashion. And instead of demanding to be fed by us, there he delights in feeding us!

The dragon has a great variety to offer in his meals for the mind. He'll try us out with many variations if we'll let him. One of his favourite brands of fear I think is one we could describe as "Possible Failure in the Eyes of our Companions in the World". How he manages to get us

in! We all want to succeed at every stage of life. We all want to have friends, we want to impress, we all want attention, we all want to be loved, we all want to keep our jobs, we all want others to appreciate us.

However, the menu is extensive, and our nasty old dragon will produce something to suit most tastes. He loves to encourage people to eat up fearful fancies about possible disease. He loves to make us frightened of other people. He likes us to have a constant fear diet of "being left alone" in the world, and of course if he really wants to put the pressure on some people, he produces the unpalatable thought of death.

Well now, what's the answer to this fellow? It's not much good producing orthodox weapons to fight against such a tricky creature that is able to pop in and out of minds. We must do something effective in the name of Christ our Prince, and I believe that the best answer is to stand firm and look the dragon right in the eyes. There must be no flinching, no turning away, no sideways glance, no quick nod of the head. We must look deep into the eyes of this creature of fear with a steadfast faith in God.

We must see him for what he is — a despicable unreal thing that has in fact no real strength at all. Instead of allowing ourselves to be drugged by his deadly diet, we have to blaze him out of existence by the power of our dependence upon God and His holy church.

How comforting then to recall an incident from the Gospel revealing how frightened were the members of the inner cabinet of the apostles on the Mount of Transfiguration. <sup>1</sup> Here was a situation out of the ordinary for Peter, James and John; and we might say at first with sympathy that the apostles had every right to be overwhelmed by the vision of Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus.

Some might even argue that there is a sense of awe involved in this pointer to Christ's divinity. Some might say that it was right that in the presence of this majestic scene, the three apostles should have been uncertain of themselves.

And yet, such suggestions would almost seem to question to judgment of our Lord Himself in allowing His close associates to share in this wonderful experience. The glimpse into the real nature of the Christ was unquestionably a mind-shattering event in the lives of Peter, James and John. But are we to believe that it was an occasion designed to create fear in their hearts? Surely not.

Surely as our Lord stood revealed in glory with the great founders of the faith, this was a moment for inexpressible joy. Peter's words, however, indicate a reaction of fear. Primarily he is desperate to try to



retain the wonder and the majesty of the moment. He hurriedly blurts out, "Master, how good it is that we are here! Shall we make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah?"

There is something understandable but yet rather sad about Peter's attempt to hang on to the passing glory. The evangelist softens the description by asserting that Peter spoke without knowing what he was saying.

The fear of Peter and his friends is one which is particularly dangerous for those of us who belong to the family of the church. How we love to cling to the glory that has passed. How we love to put our Lord in tight little compartments to suit our own interests. How frightened we are to go back into the world of reality away from the vision that we so rightly enjoy here on the mountain of worship. How delighted we are to witness the glory of the Lord, the transfiguration of the Christ, the majesty of the moment — but how frightened we are that we will lose the vision!

In the midst of the cloud of fear that overcame the three great apostles was the voice of reassurance. It comes to us in the midst of our worship today. "This is my Son, my chosen; listen to Him".<sup>2</sup>

The apostles were foolish to want to cling on to the past. They had not been left alone. They had still with them the majesty of the presence of Christ the Lord. But Jesus so often had to challenge their lack of faith, their commitment to fear. Fear will only triumph if we lack faith, fear will only win battles if we abandon Christ. Indeed, in Matthew's account of this extraordinary event on the Mountain of Transfiguration we read that Jesus actually came to the three great apostles with the words, "Stand up. Do not be afraid!"<sup>3</sup>

It is a superb message. Christ the Lord comes to us this morning in the simple majesty of His sacramental presence in bread and wine with exactly that message of hope. It comes to us as individuals, to us as members of this particular congregation at the Cathedral, to us as members of the wider Church.

"Stand up. Do not be afraid!"

1. Luke, Chapter 9, v 28 to v 36.

2. Luke, Chapter 9, v 35.

3. Matthew, Chapter 17, v 7.

Readings set down for Holy Communion —

Old Testament: 1 Kings Chapter 19, v 1 to v 12.

New Testament: 2 Peter, Chapter 1, v 16 to v 19.

The Gospel: Luke, Chapter 9, v 28 to v 36.

5



## THE DRAGON OF POWER



## THE DRAGON OF POWER

Of all the dragons that we have met this Lent, our adversary today is the most modern. The dragon of power has always been concerned to identify himself very closely with the fashions and culture of the age in which he lives. In the Middle Ages he loved to appear in suites of armour in the manner of the barons, whilst at the time of the Reformation he adored dressing up in the judges' gowns of the ecclesiastical courts. Today of course he is still prepared to dress to suit the occasion. His favourite disguise, however, is that of the top executive.

Nothing appeals to his vanity more than a modern striped tartan suit. He goes crazy about pretty coloured shirts and he adores flashy bow ties. Whenever he shows his teeth, one can notice the glitter of gold fillings. He often puffs away at giant cigars, and he adores driving fast sports cars of violent colouring.

One would think that any dragon so obviously lacking sincerity would fail to have any success in our educated society. That is far from the truth. The confidence man is a very powerful figure in the community.

Sometimes he is the pressure-salesman causing people to buy goods that are far beyond their financial resources. Sometimes he is the smooth politician looking for a vote at any price. Sometimes he is the professional man, charging extraordinary prices for advice which is no more than common sense.

Sometimes he is the minor official in the public service standing over a little person lost in a world of "red tape" in triplicate. Sometimes he is the school master dominating the lives of students to an absurd degree with his threats and mental torture. Sometimes he is the book-maker taking a fistful of notes off foolish punters. Sometimes he is the preacher putting the fear of hell into the minds of his hearers as he bellows from the pulpit.

There's no subtlety about this operator. He's so obvious that one would think that he couldn't possibly survive — and yet we know that he flourishes!

Occasionally the dragon of power goes off for holidays to dabble in international politics. There's nothing he likes more than to have to rush into an emergency session of the United Nations in order to make his point. If he has to tear up a few treaties or pay a few terrorists to strengthen his bargaining opportunities, so much the better. By encouraging nations to act like school children fighting over a bicycle gives him no end of satisfaction. He loves any excuse to allow the military to step in. Whole communities can be taken over in an instant by the forces of the dragon of power, and they can be kept under the heel for years.

But what about us? Are we foolish enough to allow the dragon into our lives?

Sadly my friends, I think that most of us would have to admit that this obvious creature has sometimes managed to seduce us all. Whilst in our better moments we might despise this creature, we have sometimes given in to the temptation to try out the taste of power over others.

There are many ways in which we have made the most of our opportunities. In the early days we can remember that it was generally a matter of brute force carrying the day. Later it became an intellectual exercise, or a question of ability in a particular sport. Sometimes it was a matter of beauty or physique that enabled us to put it over others.

But above all, the dragon of power influences our lives by reference to age or position or status.

Ask the youngest member of any family what they think about the power of the other children. Ask the messenger boy at the office what he thinks about the power of the junior clerk. Ask the new curate what he thinks about the power of the Rector. Ask the bank teller what he thinks of the power of the manager. Ask the manager what he thinks about the power of the General Manager, and ask the General Manager what he thinks about the power of a chairman of directors. There is a sad fowl-yard mentality about our world, in which the weakest can be pecked so fiercely that life becomes a bitter experience.

I have sometimes thought that the dragon of power must enjoy church meetings almost more than any other type of gathering. For we who claim to be followers of the God who became man should firmly reject his wiles and apparent attractions. How interesting then to recall that the power complex was there right in the Upper Room in the hearts of those whom the Christ had personally trained for a number of years.

It comes right out into the open in the Gospel narrative on occasions. Think of incident related by St. Mark when James and John approach Jesus asking for a favour. <sup>1</sup> "Grant us the right to sit in state with you, one at your right and one at your left . . ." There it was, the request for the key positions in the Kingdom.

And what was the reaction of the other ten? Was it one of amazement that the Zebedee brothers should have asked for such a thing? Not a bit of it. They were indignant. They were as furious as it was possible to be because they ALL felt that they should have honoured places in the Kingdom.



Jesus our Lord gives the complete answer to the power-seekers even amongst His own friends, the chosen ones on whom His church was to be built. "Among you, whoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the willing slave of all". Greatness is no longer to be measured in terms of race or status or sex or religion. Greatness in the power of Jesus is to be measured only in our ability to be the servants of others.

What the world regarded as degradation, Christ hails as the place of honour. Slaves were the very end of the pecking line in the first century, and yet it was the figure of a slave that he chose to illustrate his message about power. He was to go further in a matter of hours by allowing Himself to be nailed to a tree in the manner of the lowest criminals, the lowest scum of the earth in the eyes of the community. That instrument of shame (the Cross) was to become the instrument of our redemption. The instrument of defeat for a slave was to become the instrument of victory for a king.

Power in the Jesus Kingdom is demonstrated most superbly in a display of what appears to the world to be powerlessness. When Jesus gave His life of His own free will <sup>2</sup> to save us from ourselves and the powers of evil, He was doing the one great thing that would win the hearts of millions to a new way of sacrificial love. Countless human leaders had tried to win the world by force of arms, by intellectual brilliance, by encouraging fear, by the manipulation of people, by the control of communication, by the acquisition of wealth, by the games of government. None of them have succeeded.

Only the Jesus pattern of sacrificial love ever wins people and power. The only force that lasts is the force of love. The only weapons that subdue are those we see shining forth from the Crucifix.

O dragon of power, dress up as much as you like. Enjoy your apparent little victories amongst us — but, in fact, your grave is already prepared. We sing the song of love, the song of the Crucified, the song of the Risen Lord. We have the power of Christ.

1. Mark, Chapter 10, v 35.

2. John, Chapter 12, v 27.

#### Readings at the Holy Communion —

Old Testament: Jeremiah, Chapter 31, v 31 to 34.

New Testament: Hebrews, Chapter 9, v 11 to v 15.

The Gospel: Mark Chapter 10, v 32 to v 45.



