

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!”

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth. – Revelation 6:1-8

Conquest

Meditations

Thankful?

Does anyone remember the ‘Thankful Villages’? That tiny handful of hamlets scattered around the country that lost nobody in the First World War? With no names to write on their War Memorial? It’s strange to go to one. They seem – not so much thankful, but shy. Almost ashamed. Yes, ashamed – ashamed of getting away with something that has hurt everyone else. The last one I saw, you could sense the relief that someone had been killed in the Second World War – now they could put up a proper War Memorial like everyone else!

I have my own ‘Thankful Villages’. Times when I have missed out on things that have hurt other people. Times when I’ve been lucky but other people haven’t, times when someone has warned me or rescued me, but somebody else wasn’t warned or rescued. Times when I’ve felt a twinge of guilt that I am not hurting like other people are hurting. Ashamed of getting away with something that has hurt everyone else. I wonder why? It’s wrong, of course – I’ve nothing to be ashamed of, well, nothing relevant. But I wonder – is it useful? Is, maybe, the shame just there to protect me from pride, there just in case I feel that I missed out because I am special, because I deserve special protection from God? The shame may be wrong, but perhaps it’s the best – no, perhaps it’s the least bad option.

Prayers

For Defeat

Lord, may I learn
That the defeated can never be befriended
That the conquered can never be convinced
That the compelled can never be persuaded
But may I learn
That the defeated can befriend
That the conquered can convince
That the compelled can persuade
Amen

A Few More Thoughts on Conquest

It is easily forgotten how far John was ahead of his time. When he was writing, conquest was seen as something glorious, something to be praised. Even if it failed, well, as one of their greatest poets wrote, 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' – it is sweet and proper to die for one's country. 'The old lie', as another great poet described it from the trenches of the Great War.

John rejects this utterly. For him, conquest is the first and most deceiving of the terrors. Though dressed in shining armour and on a white horse, still he is the companion of the worst of human excesses and of natural terrors, of civil war, of tyranny, of soul grinding greed, of pestilence, of AIDS.

Civil Strife

Meditations

Prayers

A Few More Thoughts on Civil Strife

Civil strife. As I write this, the army are mopping up an obscure corner of London after the 'Real IRA' detonated a bomb there. There is nothing clever to say, nothing good, nothing helpful.

John regards civil strife – in which he may well have included not just civil war and rebellion, but also murder, banditry, piracy and similar crimes – as something different from the state war of conquest inspired by the rider on the white horse. It would be helpful to understand why. We might note that state warfare was legal, at least in his time, and even regarded by others as glorious, while civil strife never had that veneer of respectability. We might also note that civil strife involves, in general, a much higher personal commitment to The Cause, while war is a professional exercise to be regarded with professional detachment.

Trade

Meditations

The Free Markets

And so the markets whirl round and round, always making money, always measuring success by money. Our countries measure themselves with the same measure: Gross Domestic Product is the only measure of a country, however many are starving, however many are dying of TB, of beriberi, of AIDS. And it doesn't matter how the money is earned; by fair trade, by corruption, by selling children for sex, by selling kidnap victims for transplant parts, by selling land mines. All that matters is that the profits stay high. Make drugs illegal – not because they are bad, but because it keeps the price high. But don't let morality interfere – dismantle the Customs and Excise departments, in case they manage to stop the trade. After all, it contributes a huge sum to our GDP.

The fundamental tenet of Marxism is that Man is an economic animal. Alas for us, for we live in a Marxist world.

The Mark of the Beast

After all, it's the free market that matters. It's money that makes the world go round. And on every coin, every banknote, is a graven image, that we are commanded to worship. The Bible doesn't make clear whether the mark of the Beast is a deutschmark or a dollar sign, but it hardly matters, as long as it allows us to buy and sell, for that was the purpose of the Mark.

In a Chapel

Do you know what a Chapel is?

Let me remind you of a story.

One cold winter's day, Martinus, a high-ranking officer in the Roman army, is riding to an appointment, in his dress uniform and cloak – the capella, the mark of his rank. He passes an old beggarman, naked, starving with hunger, starved with cold – so cold he can hardly hold out a hand for charity. Martin sees him, and pities him. He slips off his cloak, draws his sword, and splits the cloak right down the middle. He throws half to the naked beggar, fastens the neck with a pin so that he can wear the half-cloak, and rides off to his appointment.

Details are a bit hazy after that, but when Martinus became Saint Martin, what was said to be that half cloak, that half capella, finished up in the cathedral at Paris. It attracted so many sightseers that they built a special sideroom to display the capella. And the sideroom itself came to be called the capella – la chapelle.

A chapel is a side room of a church. Not the church itself, just a side room.

So if this is a chapel, where is the church? Is it the world, the world outside, which is our church? Or is it our selves, are we the church, is our heart the church, the place wherein the Spirit dwells?

Or are we split in half, like Martin's cloak, half of us given to Jesus as he begs us to, and half still tied to our office, our business, our rank, our money? Are we, too, only a capella, a cloak? Are we a chapel with no church?

The Church

We pray to Jesus to come, to be with us in this church. If Jesus comes to his church, will he find a house of prayer, or will he have to drive out the moneychangers?

We pray to Jesus to come, to come into our hearts. If Jesus comes into our hearts, will he find a house of prayer, or will he have to drive out the moneychangers?

When we pray to Jesus to come, are we really prepared for what he might do?

Prayers

For Purity(1)

Lord, as the banknotes pass through our fingers, keep our hands from being printed by their ink, keep our heads from being sealed by their image, and our hearts from being burned by their lust. In the name of Jesus Christ, who has already marked us as his own. Amen

For Purity(2)

O Lord Jesus Christ, who overturned the tables of the money changers in your temple, overturn the tables in the temple of our heart, that we may no longer be a den of thieves, but instead become a house of prayer. This we ask through your Name which alone should be precious to us. Amen

A Few More Thoughts on Trade

Of course it is politically highly incorrect to regard capitalism as anything other than the complete salvation of the entire universe, nor is it acceptable to suggest that economics – at any rate, macroeconomics – is in fact a religion in its own right.

In order to make this book acceptable, therefore, I have to assert that capitalism, free enterprise, free markets are perfect in every way, that they are forces for good, for progress and for human growth, unity and support, and that no unprejudiced thinker can contemplate anything that would undermine them, or even raise the slightest word of protest at so obviously benevolent a system.

What a pity that the Bible totally disagrees with me in every respect.

Death

Meditations

Plague

We do forget, don't we. I had thought, thirty years ago, that we'd forgotten plagues and such, in fact I had thought that we could forget plagues, that modern medicine, modern antibiotics meant that we could forget them. Oh, there was a problem with viruses, but immunisation could handle them. That's how polio, the last great pandemic, was conquered. Yes I thought, we all thought plagues gone for ever.

Then came AIDS. And AIDS spread fast. And we couldn't cure it and we've no vaccine for it. But people said, Oh AIDS is only for gays, and we stopped worrying. Then people said, Oh AIDS was only for gays and drug users, and we stopped worrying. Then people said, Oh AIDS is only for gays, drug users, and haemophiliacs, and we stopped worrying. Then people said, Oh AIDS is only for gays, drug users, haemophiliacs and people on hormone treatments, and we stopped worrying. Then people said, Oh AIDS is only for gays, drug users, haemophiliacs, people on hormone treatments and people who've been to Africa, and we stopped worrying. Then people said, Oh AIDS is only for gays, drug users, haemophiliacs, people on hormone treatments and people who've been to Africa, the Far East, China or Russia, and we stopped worrying. Then people said, Oh AIDS is only for gays, drug users, haemophiliacs, people on hormone treatments and people who've been to Africa, the Far East, China, Russia, South America, Australasia, Central America, Europe and North America and we stopped worrying. Then people said, Oh AIDS is only for – just a minute, that's everybody. But we still stopped worrying, because it can't happen to us.

Then came Legionnaire's Disease, Lassa Fever, Ebola, Dengue, vCJD. And some old friends came back, but now with built-in drug resistance: TB, yellow fever, malaria, pneumonia, blood poisoning, typhoid. None of them a plague, of course – yet.

But it can't happen to us, can it, because if it does, what will happen to us? Where could we turn to? How could we possibly face it?

The Black Death

In two years, a third of the people died. Some places more; sometimes a half, even two-thirds. The towns especially, it was the towns that died. Even if you didn't die of the plague, you couldn't stay, because nobody brought food to them any more. Nobody dared.

But there was also one profession that suffered. One profession which lost members far out of proportion. The clergy. They carried on, visiting the sick, comforting the dying, trusting in God for their own safety. And they died.

Some said that their death was a blessing from God; that God had seen their dedication and had granted them the highest honour – a martyr's crown.

Some said it was God's judgement on the church. That it showed that the church had stopped following God and had become corrupt, idolatrous, damned.

Some said it proved that God was no loving God, but a jealous God, a violent, unforgiving God who destroyed those he chose to destroy – because he chose to; because humanity was evil, because destroying humanity was good in God's eyes. Only the elect, the few God had arbitrarily picked to keep alive were safe.

Some said it indeed proved that God was unforgiving, and ready to destroy an evil humanity, but that was our fault; if we turned back to him, if we proved our repentance by fasting almost to death, by locking ourselves in cells, by self-flagellation and self-torture, maybe his wrath would be placated.

Some said it proved that there was no God. That the clergy had trusted in an illusion. But what did it matter? We were all going to the same place in the end – nowhere.

Some said – but what do we say?

Prayers

A Few More Thoughts on Death

This is not simply Death in general terms. Not for this Death the dignified end in bed, fortified by Holy Church and surrounded by grieving but loving relatives. This Death really is the mediæval nightmare, on his pale horse, riding through the countryside spreading plague and famine and war.

Think bubonic plague. Think syphilis. Think influenza. Think smallpox. Think AIDS. Think anthrax. Think Lassa fever. Think Ebola. And be afraid.

Some Final Thoughts on the Four Horsemen

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have become a cliché of cheap Hollywood horror flicks. Unfair, surely! For a start, the Apocalypse is not the end of the world – it's the name of the book; the Greek form of Revelation. Then, the Horsemen are hardly new horrors: conquest, civil strife, capitalism, death, these have been with us since the beginning of history.

There are three ways of understanding the Revelation of John. The first sees it as about John's own time; the second sees it as about the end time, the end of the world; the third sees it as covering the whole span of human history from John's time forward to the end of the world. Each has its own subspecies and varieties. But there is one characteristic that all three, in all their subspecies, varieties and named forms have in common: all can produce a strong, convincing case for their own rightness, and none can produce any strong evidence against any of the others.

The fourth possibility is so universally sneered at as 'Poetic' or 'Symbolic' that it is probably correct. This is that John is looking at Time not from the side, like the rest of us, but end on. Imagine a stick of rock. You start to eat it at one end. It has ripples, flaws, lumps, bubbles, and eventually another end. But if, instead of eating it along its length, you had looked at it from the end, you would have seen the pattern – the flower, the cherries, the words 'Present from Blackpool' – that runs all the way through. Maybe that is what John did, and maybe that is what he has described for us.

But I am not prepared to stick my head over the parapet; I have simply taken their obvious symbolic meanings and interpreted them totally out of context. You do as you please.

Whoever is right, it is obvious that the Four Horsemen are not some distant horror of the future. It is obvious that they are here, now, riding among us – not because of what John says, however we interpret his words, but because we can see them for ourselves on every news bulletin.