

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

— or ‘Here be Dragons’

By PAUL EDWARDS

TO BE strictly accurate, there is only one dragon: ‘behold a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven’ (Apoc 12,3-4). With destructive power of that order, one dragon seems quite enough, yet he summons to his aid a ‘beast’:

And I saw a beast rising out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear’s and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth (13,1.2).

If you have a lively visual imagination you can easily overstrain it trying to bring all the bizarre equipment of these malefic beings into a passably harmonious composition. You are not meant to. The *London Punch* (an illustrated humorous magazine and an institution in Britain) once published a large coloured illustration of an old-fashioned poet down on one knee declaiming his verse enthusiastically to a handsome young woman. On her features was depicted no answering enthusiasm, but an expression of doubt verging on dissatisfaction and irritation. Above her head was a ‘thinks’ balloon, containing what one supposed was a raven’s wing, two large stars beneath that, a tender rosebud beneath them and the whole formation somehow balanced upon a particularly undulant swan’s neck. As we read the description of the beast, we must not commit the same solecism as the literal-minded young lady, and try to picture something looking like a leopard with the feet of a bear and the jaws of a lion. The description is not meant to tell us what the thing looked like; it is meant to give us some feel for its nature and disposition.

There are two things which the writers of the New Testament seem rarely to go in for, physical descriptions and humour.

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Nowadays we want to be able to imagine people and things, and a modern press interviewer will always be careful to help us to do so: '... he received me in his small, brightly-painted fisherman's cottage, which looks across the grey waters of the estuary, his sixty years belied by his abundant and still dark hair, the eager, boyish sparkle in his clear green eyes and the lithe frame clad in a vivid red pullover and dark corduroy slacks . . .'. But you can comb the gospels and you will remain wholly in the dark as to whether Christ was tall or short, whether he was broad or slight of frame. You will not learn there what Mary looked like, or any of the Twelve. The Acts of the Apostles is equally devoid of material about the appearance of its chief characters or of the cities in which Paul preached and the lands through which he journeyed. This is not, I am sure, because the writers were interested only in the supra-mundane, or because their minds moved all the time on a higher plane. The Jews were a down-to-earth, physical people. They cared about appearances. Wily Herod knew what he was doing when he gave them one of the show-pieces of the ancient world as the setting for their already splendid rituals.

I suppose one always underestimates the economy forced on the New Testament writers; paper was expensive, penmanship a skilled craft. People were sparing with both. Paul, that passionate propagandist, was often prodigal with paper and his scribe's time, as he was prodigal of words, energy and emotional involvement, but he still concentrated on his religious message. Similarly intent, and much less exuberant, the other authors were very conscious of the need to be selective. 'There are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written' (Jn 21,25). In those circumstances, perhaps we ought to be grateful that they did not have recourse to telegraphese! They do tell some stories at length. Luke, for instance, devotes as many verses to the story of the encounter on the road to Emmaus as he spends on the story of the Passion from Pilate's verdict to Jesus's last breath. This he does because his readers knew what happened when a man was crucified, and there was no need to tell them, whereas most of them found it quite unimaginable that a man who had been crucified could be the Messiah and Saviour; so it is to this aspect of his message that Luke, like his colleagues a devoted pedagogue, addresses himself. When these men write they are teaching, preaching, explaining, persuading, warning. They are not compiling an interesting record;

they are not trying to entertain. So we shall never know what any of the gospel characters looked like.

There is one description of Christ in the New Testament. He is seen in a vision by the same seer whom I have quoted about the dragon and the beast. 'His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow, his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters . . .' (Apoc 1, 14-15). That, of course, tells you nothing about Christ's appearance. It is a densely woven tissue of symbols, all borrowed from the Old Testament prophets and quite familiar to many of the seer's readers. It is an attempt to describe not an appearance, but a significance. It communicates Christ's grandeur and glory. It is particularly eloquent in that most of the symbols originally occur in Old Testament visions of the Deity. The technique here is to communicate non-visual qualities through easily-imaginable symbols such as snow, flame and bronze. Readers familiar with the hebrew prophets would be quite at home in interpreting such symbols in terms of Christ's status and mission, and were presumably content to remain wholly uninformed about Christ's stature and lineaments.

To me, a greater deprivation than the lack of physical descriptions in the New Testament is the comparative rarity of humour. Humour is no trivial element in our lives. It is a prerogative of man, which the brute creation does not share. It springs from our intelligence, our imagination and creativity. It eases tension, defuses hostility, creates rapport between individuals, enriches friendship, makes the unpleasant a little more tolerable and renders the agreeable even more enjoyable. It also provides an effective test of the genuine. True dignity, real worth can tolerate being made fun of: portentousness and pretence never. Shakespeare can put broad farce into a play, and the impact of the drama and the power of the poetry suffer nothing from the juxtaposition. The writers of the New Testament do not mix their genres in this way.

Would that they did! Relevant again here is my previous remark that I must be grateful that they did not write in telegraphese. In the gospels and in the epistles there is great urgency. The writers are possessed by an imperative need to communicate their knowledge. They narrate, explain, argue and persuade, but, unlike Shakespeare, they are not writing to entertain; they are not concerned to produce literature. What they have to say has more in common with the matter of an urgent telegram than with the

elements of deliberate literary creation. In their urgent concern to communicate, they frequently achieve vivid narrative, trenchant exposition and pithy and even pungent comment, but not humour.

I believe that I can see traces of Christ's humour here and there in the gospels. I think that I can detect it in some of the parables, in some of his verbal sparring, in the fact that he gave nicknames to the Sons of Zebedee. (Did he have nicknames for all the Twelve?) I don't know whether Luke meant us to smile when he tells us about the young man who fell asleep during Paul's all-night sermon, or about the maid who left Peter locked out: a story which is all the more pleasant when you remember that iron gates and four squads of four soldiers had not been able to keep Peter in prison, but the oversight of an excited girl could keep him cooling his heels on a domestic doorstep. I am reasonably confident that Paul, who seems to have been able to pull out every other oratorical stop, could amuse when he wanted. In the book 'Revelation', however, biased though I am in its favour, I can detect not a mote of humour, nor the slightest trace of any.

This total absence of humour is not the only unattractive aspect of this particular inspired book. Its symbols, although I think that I have trained myself to appreciate them in some degree, strike many a reader as naïve (dragons, forsooth!), lurid and frustratingly obscure. Worst of all, the theme of the book seems so repetitiously vengeful. One groans, not with terror but with tedium, as the umpteenth angel sounds yet another trumpet, or empties out one more bowl of the vengeance of God upon the wicked, so that they are afflicted by still another hideous plague or struck by some new cosmic cataclysm, 'and blood flowed from the wine press (of the wrath of God), as high as a horse's bridle for one thousand six hundred stadia' (14,20). Imagine that!

I received some enlightenment in this matter more than fifteen years ago from half a dozen small children. I found myself watching part of a television version of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In this episode the odious dwarf, Daniel Quilp, met his end. We watched him fleeing from his pursuers through the dense fog, unable to see more than a few inches in front of him. Totally lost, he topples into the river, where he frenziedly tries to keep himself afloat, unable to tell where the bank might be. His terror, his panic, was very effectively conveyed and I sat there horrified. Not so the children who, as Quilp went down for the last time, let out a unanimous and spontaneous cheer. I had been watching a horrible death. They had seen an evil

man, who had been responsible for the sufferings of Little Nell and others, destroyed by his own machinations. The good were delivered from him, and, except for poor Nell, could now live happily ever after. This was worth a cheer.

The story of the triumph of good over evil has many literary forms, but the message remains the same. Good prevails; evil is defeated, and if in such stories evil is personified in the villains, the defeat of evil is spelled out in the villains' death. With our modern sensitivity we might prefer conversion stories, and I should have found it easier to watch Quilp won over to a life of honesty and philanthropy, but I don't think that the children would have been moved to cheer. And if we were to rewrite all the epics as conversion stories, with Goliath becoming an ambassador of goodwill between the Philistines and the Hebrews, and the ranks of Tuscany deciding to give Rome's new experiment in republican government their economic and diplomatic support, would anybody re-tell the stories? I doubt if you can tamper with a literary form and preserve its vitality. And 'Revelation' is a piece of highly imaginative literature to be understood only within its own conventions.

I described 'Revelation' as tediously vengeful. Even if one can reconcile oneself to the mythological requirement that the forces of evil should be resoundingly defeated, it is still wearisome to have that defeat re-staged so often. Must there be another plague, another vast battle, more fire from heaven every time I turn a page? As a used-up schoolmaster I recognize the technique, even if I do not enjoy it, and I am constrained to acknowledge its necessity. You may convey a piece of factual knowledge by stating it once. If it is an essential piece of knowledge you must see that it is re-stated, perhaps in different forms, so often that it cannot be forgotten. If a truth is to be absorbed into the imagination, to be appreciated and felt, to become an important part of the hearer's outlook, it will usually have to be presented several times, and preferably in a variety of ways. This is what the author of 'Revelation' is trying to do. If I do not like his idiom and technique, then I must abstract the truth he is so concerned to teach, and go on to find my own way of impressing it on my imagination and digesting it into my general religious outlook, while remaining grateful to the book for stating that truth and conveying its urgency and importance. Nevertheless, to understand the author's technique is not necessarily to enjoy it, and his litany of cataclysms and hecatombs becomes no more palatable because I understand what it is doing there.

Yet 'Revelation' is the section of the Bible outside the gospels which I have most often read, which I have most studied — entirely voluntarily — and which has most influenced my thinking. Its symbols, since I came to some minimal understanding of them, intrigue me, and in that I am not alone. 'Revelation' is a favourite source for mosaics, stained glass and representation in almost every medium. I say 'almost' because I can remember no sculptural expression of any of its scenes, other than Epstein's splendid Michael at Coventry. As one becomes attuned to the book it turns out to be vivid, dramatic and beyond doubt the product of literary genius. The structure is fascinating: the deployment of *dramatis personae* and the unrolling of events superbly controlled. Detailed comment, as I am not writing a piece of literary criticism, I must waive, with only passing mention of its magnificent 'diptychs'; the 'Woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars' (12,1), over against the 'great harlot', 'sitting on a scarlet beast, arrayed in purple and scarlet and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls' (17,4); the dragon with his attendant beasts and their branded subjects, balanced by the triumphant Lamb and the multitude of the redeemed 'who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads'. And I must mention the extraordinary dramatic pauses which the author inserts into the almost headlong action. Thus, when events unroll in their sevens, there is commonly inserted between the sixth and the climactic seventh a double scene of quite different pace and character; and I am always fascinated by that riveting insertion, 'when the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour' (8,1).

My relish for Revelation's literary qualities I admit to be an acquired taste, a by-product, as far as I am concerned, of the laborious effort to penetrate to the author's message. The book is providentially the last work in the Bible. Apparently it was by no means the last piece of the New Testament to be written, yet there it is, having, as it were, the last word, and I want to know what that last word contains for my enlightenment and guidance. Paradoxically, I think that it fits particularly well at the end of the New Testament because of its continual references to the Old. The roots of 'Revelation' reaching back through Daniel, Ezechiel and Exodus to Genesis itself — I am always pleased to see that reference to the 'tree of life' in Revelation's last chapter — seem to me to help to bind the whole corpus of scripture together. I also enjoy the

gleaming, glittering metamorphosis of Jerusalem in the penultimate chapter, which provides a glorious ending for the city conquered by David, embellished by Solomon, ravaged by Babylon, rebuilt by Nehemiah; the city in which Christ died and the Church was born.

Yet it is not for the pleasure of contemplating the New Jerusalem that I re-read 'Revelation', nor out of partiality for dragons, nor even to savour the apocalyptic choreography. I read therein in the hopes of absorbing the final message of the New Testament, and because I believe that final message to have been delivered to people whose situation was fundamentally our own, whose needs therefore closely resemble our needs, who in that situation and among those needs were given guidance which we also ought to attend to and follow. 'Revelation' was addressed to people who for the most part were born after Christ had died, who were living when those who had known Christ were dead, who were practising Christians when the first great Pentecostal wave had already passed, to people who, adapting John's words, 'had not seen and yet believed'. The book is written to people who have been Christians for some time, members of congregations established not at all recently, believers for whom the good news of the gospel was not at all new.

Chapters two and three show us to what manner of Christian 'Revelation' was first addressed. These chapters, in strong contrast with the rest of the work, are wholly free from spectacle and melodrama. Not a trumpet sounds, not a single flash of lightning is to be seen, as each of seven local churches receive their messages. The chapters are not flatly prosaic; each message begins with some detail skilfully linking it to the initial vision of Christ, and concludes with a different and highly imaginative symbol of salvation, my favourite being that held out to Thyatira, 'and I will give him the morning star' (2,28). But the messages themselves are terse and telling, whether for praise or censure. The Churches are judged as to whether they have shown themselves faithful and persevering in the face of hostile pressure. This is not a matter merely of persecution from without, a serious enough matter in itself indeed, but of perverted teaching within the congregations and, most malignant of all, the fading of their own vision, and the attrition of their personal commitment to Christ.

It is for failings under this last heading that censure is at its most severe. 'Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth', the Laodiceans are told (3,15). Sardis, even more sternly, 'you have the name of being alive and you are

dead' (3,1). Much-praised Ephesus is told with compassionate rigour, 'I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first' (2,4). As for false teaching among these churches, we have clear evidence of its existence and precious little about its nature. Ephesus is praised for its resistance to the 'Nicolaitans', Sardis is warned about their presence and also of that of people 'who hold the teaching of Balaam', while Thyatira is reprimanded because 'you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess' (2,20). Similarly, it is clear that these Christians experience persecution, but it is not always clear who persecutes them and by what means. For two congregations the hostility of the local Jews is a serious factor, but we are not told what form it took. At Pergamum, 'Antipas, my faithful one, has been put to death' (2,13), but we are not told how, or by whom. Smyrna is warned, 'the devil is about to throw some of you into prison' (2,10), but we do not know who acted for the devil on this occasion, nor on what grounds. When the churches are commended, the virtue most frequently mentioned is 'patient endurance'. For this, Ephesus, Thyatira and Philadelphia are praised, and it is to the same virtue, phrased a little differently, that they are urged. 'Hold fast what you have', Smyrna, Thyatira and Philadelphia are exhorted; but to Smyrna are addressed the still graver words: 'Be faithful unto death' (2,10).

These early christian congregations were obviously small affairs, and their members people of little consequence even in their own environment. So weak was their position that even the Jews could seem formidable enemies, although themselves outsiders in those cities, regarded with suspicion and sometimes the victims of anti-jewish riots. Most frightening could be the hostility of pagan fellow-citizens, while the possibility of an imperial persecution must have been horrifying. For the Christians, dragons and ten-horned beasts did stalk the world. Indeed, the combination of ten horns, a bear's paws and a lion's jaws hardly does justice to the fell power of Rome when wielded by a Nero or a Domitian. And we must keep it in mind that persecution was only one of the dangers which menaced them. What are they to do about Nicolaitans and other purveyors of unchristian doctrine? At that early period of the Church's evolution, both doctrinal and organizational, were the doctrines of the Church formulated explicitly, and definitively enough, and authority within the local church so clearly assigned, that it was quite clear who should pronounce in matters of orthodoxy and what steps they

should take to preserve it? Or were the congregations often a prey to dissension and bewilderment, because authoritative formulation of doctrine and the structure of jurisdiction were still rudimentary?

How exposed those early Christians were! 'Revelation' has a terrible picture of exposure, of total vulnerability; the dragon, his tail having just swept a third of the stars of heaven out of the sky, 'stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth' (12,4). That verse chills my blood at every reading; to me it presents the defencelessness of Christ more piercingly than Isaiah or the Passion narratives. Actually, in 'Revelation' at this point there is no reference to the crucifixion, and the child is 'caught up to God and to his throne' (12,5). The woman, who apparently stands both for Israel and the Church, is the next target of the dragon's malice, and she also is preserved by special intervention. 'Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus' (12,17). The Christians of Ephesus, Pergamum and the other cities must have been able to hear those dragon-feet padding all round them, and imagined that catastrophe-dealing tail curving over their heads.

I said above that the situation of those early Christians was 'fundamentally our own'. We live, as they lived, between the death of Christ and his second coming, and in that long age the dragon walks, and we also are children of the Woman. The fact that there are hundreds of millions of baptized members of the Church, and the people of the Seven Churches could have been accommodated in one of our cathedrals with room to spare, does not make us the less exposed. 'For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked' (2,17). Few things are as debilitating as complacency. The dragon has not gone to sleep in our time because I am not likely to be mauled to death by lions in the arena. The dragon's tail has dealt roughly enough with the Church in China, and in most countries beyond the Iron Curtain her life is restricted and opposed, while the Caesars of the Kremlin and their client courts remain capable of ruthless repression of a sort to make the efforts of Julian and Flavian Emperors look amateurish and half-hearted.

Then there are large areas of the world where the mass of the population has been duly baptized into the Church, where heads of governments may attend the *Te Deum* ordered for the celebration of

the anniversary of their seizure of power, where a prevailing Voltairean scepticism does not inhibit public politeness to clerics and religious; and it is only when they speak too pointedly about rights and justice that they are denounced as communists, perhaps imprisoned, possibly murdered. As I sit here this Easter Sunday scribbling these reflections, I am not likely in the immediate future to be arrested for priestcraft, or imprisoned for my occasional anti-capitalist mutterings; but I should be very naïf if I thought that in our tolerant, pluralist climate the dragon cannot, or does not, prowl. I must teach myself to remember that in the messages to the Seven Churches the threat of persecution, which would seem to us easily the worse menace on their horizon, though clearly forecast, receives less emphasis than their internal weaknesses.

Catholics, although aware of their individual frailty, used to feel secure in the Church. In the course of centuries of controversy, the One True Church had evolved a network of systematic formulae to express true christian doctrine neatly, precisely and permanently. The formulae were there to be consulted admiringly in seminary textbooks, in digests of Catholic Doctrine and in the Catechism. Catholic moral teaching had been similarly codified, and confessors were trained not only to know and apply their 'moral' compendia, but also to recognize the more subtle and unusual issue and seek its solution from the specialist. There always was a solution, for we enjoyed an infallible guide in faith and morals. We knew where to look for authoritative teaching; we were equally clear about matters of discipline. The Pope ruled the Church and the bishops their dioceses under him. Canon law, the decrees of Roman Congregations and *ad clerum* letters told us what we might do and not do. Authority was plainly indentifiable and our discipline outstanding, as behoved the Church Militant, with its members always on active service in a truceless war.

The security conferred by that kind of clarity, that brand of certitude, is now lost to us. Theologians point out to us that the same words do not say the same things to different generations, that words 'slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision', that much of our theological terminology, many of our theological concepts, rest on a philosophical system we no longer hold. No verbal expression, they rightly point out, can capture and imprison for ever the essential truths concerning God and Man. Manfully the theologians labour to find new *points de départ*: to harness contemporary philosophies, to produce new terminologies where necessary, and to correct the over-

or under-emphases of the past. Unfortunately all this is a very esoteric affair, and those of us who have to keep asking someone else to remind us which is existential and which is *existentiel* soon get quite lost. We also, as happens when people get lost, get frightened. Have these exploratory theologians been courageous or presumptuous? Are they carrying out re-adjustments or demolitions? Are the doctrines of the Divinity of Christ, Papal Infallibility, the Real Presence, the *ex opere operato* effect of the sacraments still held by them? To some of us heresy would seem to have taken over; I myself just wonder at times whether the attempt to re-interpret the Faith for Contemporary Man has done anything except re-interpret it to the re-interpreters.

Traditional moral theology — by which I do not mean traditional christian morality, but our attempt to systematize and codify it — has slipped and slid. It is to be hoped that it does not perish before we have found a new set of tools to do its work. Traditional sexual morality is being 're-interpreted' not so much by theorists, although these are at work, as by a good deal of very down-to-earth, grassroots activity. It is nothing new for people to break the rules; it seems to me new for them to repudiate the rules, as do some practising Catholics in the matter of re-marriage after divorce, and many young Catholics in the matter of pre-marital sex. The tangle over contraception exhibits our confusion over both moral theology and doctrinal authority. Ecclesiastical authority reiterates traditional teaching and is frequently disregarded, not simply out of wantonness, but because the location of authority has now become unclear. The centralized absolutism of the Vatican is no longer accepted unhesitatingly. Many want to see the regular, genuine, untrammelled exercise of the collective responsibility of the episcopate, and would like to see the views of theologians, the pastoral experience of priests and the moral discernment of conscientious and mature lay people counting for a very great deal more in the deliberations of the Church. Some unfortunate people, misunderstanding the phrase 'you must follow your conscience', have simply become their own popes. So what was an absolute monarchy has become somewhat diluted with oligarchy, distracted with demands for a generous measure of consultative democracy, and has degenerated at the fringes into sheer anarchy.

Catholics who greatly prized their former security (is St Linus their patron?) are sincerely scandalized. The exploratory theologians seem to them heretics and propagators of heresy, and the revisionists

in moral theology to have surrendered to pagan standards, or the lack of them; authority has failed in its responsibility to govern, and the rest of us have been found wanting in the key virtue of obedience. The liberals or progressives are, I think, a shade less demoralized, but quite as discontented. Episcopal synods, diocesan commissions, parish councils seem to them placatory gestures rather than genuine instruments of consultation. So it is with many other reforms which they find partial and inconclusive, tantalizing rather than satisfying. Their picture is of the upper echelons of the celibate, clerical hierocrats tenaciously preserving all they can of their own power and of the outlook and practices which sustain it. The rest of us they blame not for disobedience, but for apathy and acquiescence. It would be nicely comforting if I could say that these two pictures are so opposed to one another that they neatly cancel each other out, showing that the Church has conducted herself with sensible moderation, surrendering to neither extreme and proceeding at a controlled pace acceptable to the bulk of her members. That would be to kid ourselves. I am not claiming that the pews are smouldering with resentment either at past glories wantonly demolished or at visions of the future now dimmed and deferred. There is an awareness of the deep inconsistency between the reaffirmed teaching of *Humanae Vitae* and the conviction and practice of most western Catholics. There is some unease, sometimes degenerating into cynicism, though I could not estimate its scale, about a resolute opposition to remarriage after divorce and a multiplication in our time of decrees of nullity. Many older members of the congregation have been saddened by the failure of priest, school and family to prevent the defection of their children from the Church. They are also painfully aware of their own and everybody else's inability to state traditional christian sexual morality in a way which their children find even half convincing.

One result of clerical celibacy, which I think does not receive sufficient attention, is that priests come from lay families — or not at all. Priestly recruitment thus becomes some sort of index of the degree of commitment in the pews. What depressing comment then comes from the present state of recruitment to the priesthood and to the religious congregations! I would not dare to say whether this indicates a lukewarmness of christian faith or simply a want of confidence in its traditional institutions. The first explanation would be more disquieting than the second; either is dismaying. I have sometimes consoled myself with the notion, which I am far from

renouncing, that Providence is calling the Church to produce new forms of ministry, new forms of dedication. In that case I must also believe that in its rigid adherence to the seminary-trained celibate as the only acceptable presbyteral form in the western Church, and in its obstinate preservation of a male monopoly of the ministry even as far down as formal acceptance to lectorship, ecclesiastical authority is resisting Providence to the considerable impoverishment of the Church. And I do not find that a consoling deduction.

It is symptomatic of our time that we speak a great deal less of the Church Militant and would rather employ the phrase 'the Pilgrim Church'. The latter model is surely more consonant with gospel ideals and certainly expresses the decrease in our sense of security. Any dragon with sense would pass up a well-equipped, well-drilled fighting unit in favour of mauling a huddle of pilgrims. Is this decrease of confidence in our organization a real deterioration? Or is a high degree of exposure, reaching its apogee in the picture of the Woman about to give birth, the right situation for Christians, linking us not only with the Woman, but more importantly perhaps with the Lamb?

I have suggested that the Church in our day, with its millions of members, experiences something of that same vulnerability of which the Seven Churches, with the exception of the smug folk of Laodicea, must have been so apprehensively aware. They knew persecution, and so do large areas of the Church of the twentieth century. They had problems with regard to orthodoxy and organization; so, to a degree which the Ultramontane Church of my youth would never have expected, do we. Yet it was not the open persecution of the Christians which most concerned him 'who holds the seven stars in his right hand', nor was it the damage inflicted by 'those who call themselves apostles, but are not' (2,2), or by Jezebel or the Nicolaitans. The profoundest warnings deal with the robustness, or rather the lack of it, of what we might nowadays call the commitment of these early Christians. It is the vigour of their faith or its weakness, the vitality or otherwise of their loving adherence, which is the key issue in Christ's assessment of them. Judged by this criterion would we be found to stand in less peril than the folk of the Seven Churches? They lived as a tiny minority in a pagan world; we of the modern West exist in a world which has been called post-christian, which certainly seems to retain less of its christian past with every successive decade. Which situation is the more debilitating to faith, hope and charity? The world of the first

Christians was pagan, but it was religious. Our world withdraws from Christianity into irreligion. The first-century Ephesian may have breathed an atmosphere of paganism, but it did not come at him from his TV set and the weekly periodical and with all the vivid immediacy of the so-called 'media'. The natural scientists had not presented him with a world picture of an unimaginable vastness and complexity to make religious thought seem a quaint collection of primitively naïve concepts. That Ephesian did not have to ask himself whether psychology and sociology do not give much more insight into how a man should live and how society should conduct itself than does the Bible. He had not had the experience of seeing regularly observant Christians allowing their actions and attitudes to be dictated, not by gospel principles but by racial prejudice, irrational, nationalist emotion or economic self-interest. I am not arguing that our situation is worse than that of the Christians of the Seven Churches. I do maintain that we are no less exposed to demoralization. First century or twentieth, we all of us make good dragon's meat.

Rules for Dealing with the dragon

1. *Admit he is there.* Acknowledge, objectively but compassionately, the weaknesses of the Church. Assess honestly and penitently 'your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance' (2,39), or the lack of them.
2. *Do not be surprised.* We are children of 'the Woman'; we are followers of 'the Lamb who was slain'. What did you expect?
3. *Don't run away.* Here the laws of the Looking Glass World apply: Run away and you have walked into his jaws. 'Hold fast what you have!' (2,25)
4. *Remember that if you stand firm and he devours you, it is he that will die of it.* This is the law of the Resurrection. 'Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life'. (2,10)
5. *Study 'Revelation'.* Absorb the very direct and simple advice given to the churches in the early section. Wrestle with the apparently complex symbolism (it is rather fun). Learn to be patient with its restatements of the same point. Most of all, digest its principal lesson: It is the dragon who is doomed.