

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Revelation Chapter 9: Some notes

If you thought some of the previous chapters were weird...Again, unless you take the wilder science fiction seriously and believe in monsters, you are not going to take the detail (as opposed to the essential message seriously). Locust wars were and are real enough, and devastating enough – swarms 100 feet thick and four miles long and devastating acres of countryside. A locust does have a head a bit like a miniature horse. But locusts are up to five inches across and two inches long, and don't cross-bred with scorpions (See the first two chapters of Joel for locusts. The people of John's time didn't know what we know about the number and size of stars, but the better informed among them would probably not have expected the earth to survive a collision with stars – meteors maybe.

The people of John's time (some of them at any rate) did have a concept of falling stars/meteors being falling spiritual forces; and of evil forces being imprisoned below the earth for potential release. (After all, volcanoes indicated nasty things ready to be spewed out.)

Usual C S Lewis parallel: Start worshiping evil gods and get evil consequences. There is plenty of historical evidence of just how nasty worshipers of nasty gods can be and indeed of how nasty worshipers of a warped picture of the real God can be (Spanish Inquisition?). But pause for reflection. What is idolatry? We have images of various sorts at St George's – anything wicked and dangerous in this. Is using images or icons in worship idolatry?

Even more important, is pronged torture really part of the purposes of a living God? (The five months may come from the average life span of a locust.) Equally important, have you ever wished that someone would really suffer... or might you think that way if someone had really damaged you or someone you loved?

It is worth reflecting on John's perspective on the Christian good news in relation to the any natural and man-made events of his own time. Evangelical Christians sometimes still see all the nasty things of our time as God warnings to people who carry on ignoring the message, and sinning in their deafness. In other words, this isn't a determinist message, in the sense that God is going to do things irrespective of what we do. It is a message that God has created a world in which we can make choices that have consequences. The thing about idols is less about how we worship God than about what sort of God we worship and how we behave. Maybe read Isaiah 61 as a God Loves Us antidote to any negative messages we pick up from this Revelation chapter and its Old Testament and Apocrypha counterparts.