“***One Like a Son of Man***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Nov. 29, 2020

**Daniel 7:9–14**

9 As I looked, thrones were placed and one that was ancient of days took his seat; his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. 10 A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

11 I looked then because of the sound of the great words which the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was slain, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. 12 As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. 13 I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. 14 And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Here we are on the first Sunday of Advent, yet our text is a grand vision from the Old Testament, the meaning of which is not immediately clear to us. In Daniel, this passage follows a description of several beasts, which stand for violent, Gentile empires that rise up, one after the other. Then comes this passage, with the destruction of beast-like Gentile empires, and their replacement by a humane Jewish empire. Jews had endured one bossy pagan empire after another, and were yearning for the vindication of God and of righteous living. The Ancient of Days seems to be described in a way that is traditional for God.

Over time, though, Jews and then Christians started to speculate about the son of man as a distinct figure, not just a symbol. In the minds of Jews and Christians, it was always a profound and hopeful prophecy, but in different ways. In Christian thought, “the one like a son of man” was, of course, identified with the one who, in his earth life, called himself the Son of Man. So Christians have long seen this as a foretelling the granting of an everlasting kingdom by God the Father to God the Son. And we hear the words of Daniel echoed in later texts, such as in what Gabriel will say to Mary, his promise that “of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33).

Daniel’s prophecy occurred within “a dream and visions” (Dan 7:1). How do we understand it? As with many of our dreams, it raises questions for us. Is it a real event that has already happened, signifying the spiritual kingdom that Jesus rules in heaven? As he said, “my kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Is it an imagined event that won’t literally happen? Or is it an event that hasn’t happened yet, and which would include Jesus’ rule over the physical world? Where is this dominion to which it refers? What kind of hope does it give us today?

I want to look at hope itself. Hope is the theme of this Advent Sunday, and it is an appropriate theme in its own right. Where does Christian hope come from? I don’t think it relies on a single particular Scripture, but it comes from the effect that *any* Scripture has on your heart, and the process of spiritual desire and hope that starts to churn within you whenever you take a passage to heart. Whenever you think about God, something starts stirring within you, and it is within that inner experience that hope develops. Hope is born within our spiritual life. The starting place may have been a Scripture, but the birth and *validation* of hope come from the faith experiences you have had. It’s like an inner fire. Sometimes people only have a spiritual breakthrough after they have had a painful experience or have taken a wrong path and then hit bottom. Many alcoholics testify to this experience: bottoming out, realizing their helplessness, gaining hope for a second chance, then making a decision to change their lives, and calling on a higher power for help.

Terminally ill patients experience a better quality of life if they have spiritual well-being, and if they think about what is meaningful in their lives, which then has benefits throughout their lives (“An assisted structured reflection on life events and life goals in advanced cancer patients,” in *Palliative Medicine,* Feb. 2019, at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6529670/>).

This is true in healthy people as well. If we reflect upon our blessings, think about what is meaningful to us, and recognize how the Spirit of God has been at work, guiding and sustaining us through difficult times, then we will trust God. If we have a healthy spiritual life, then we will truly have good quality of life. But no man is an island. For healthy living, we need to have confirmative relationships, that is, with people who listen and care. Even so, hope is something of a mystery. It seems to draw upon several wellsprings. Spiritual well-being is only one of them.

Hope for humanity involves a certain degree of trust in the positive outworking of life and of institutions. Such a trust can be partly spiritual, partly social and psychological in origin. The nature of our hope is partly shaped by our beliefs about society. Of course, how much more progress can be made if we participate in hopeful, faith-led actions. How does the Spirit speak to and inspire you?

The Spirit is already within us, as Paul said: “Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). Give thanks that there is an immediate link to God through the Spirit that is within you. This indeed is another blessing. You may not be actively conscious of God, but you are making a real connection every time you pray sincerely, and every time you contemplate in awe and wonder. The honest prayer cannot fail to cause spiritual communion with God.

So what about the Daniel prophecy of “one like a son of man”? Of course, it is an expression of the author’s hope. I think it probably *is* also a prophecy of the spiritual kingdom that Jesus rules. As of now, that kingdom prevails in the afterlife, but it is only partially existent here and now on earth. When more people become responsive to the Spirit, Jesus’ kingdom will spread on the earth. And it will be an everlasting kingdom, once it takes hold.

I don’t know whether there was a literal event that took place before the Ancient of Days, or whether it was an imaginative vision of Daniel, expressing his hope for the vindication and triumph of Israel. I *do* feel confident that the dominion of Jesus the Messiah will be an everlasting dominion, in heaven and, eventually, on earth. This is why we call him a king. He rules heaven, and he will some day rule earth. As we sing, “he rules the earth with truth and grace.” Actually, not yet, but he *will*, some day. So this Scripture communicates a message of hope that is appropriate for Advent. Let us give thanks that this message of hope is alive within us, and that we are truly blessed.