Followers of the Way

Lions, Unicorns and Woodworm

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Colossians 2

Good morning Everyone. We are going to start by looking into the world of lions and unicorns. We know that the Lion of the Tribe of Judah is a descriptor in Revelation 5:5 of Jesus Christ, building upon Genesis 49:9, which compares the tribe of Judah to a crouching lion. Tins of golden syrup used to quote the second part of Samson's riddle in Judges 14:14, 'out of the eater came something to eat, out of the strong came forth sweetness.' Samson killed a lion with his bare hands and returned to discover that a swarm of bees had built honeycomb within its carcass. The lion here represents the fierce, destructive enemies of Israel (specifically the Philistines) killed by Samson as a demonstration of God's power to crush the opposition. The honey inside the dead lion is seen as symbolic of how God can take a dangerous situation and turn it into a source of sweetness for His people. But it also foreshadows the death and victory of Jesus Christ, the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

Biblically, lions can represent strength, royal authority and divine judgment, but, additionally, the predatory nature of spiritual opposition. They can also represent judgment and destruction; the prophet Amos uses the lion as a metaphor for God's impending judgment, "The lion has roared — who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken — who will not prophesy?" (Amos 3:8.) Similarly, in Jeremiah 4:7, the lion is depicted as a destroyer: "A lion has gone up from his thicket, and a destroyer of nations has set out. He has left his lair to lay waste your land. Your cities will be reduced to ruins and lie uninhabited." In Ezekiel 1:10, the lion is one of the four faces of the cherubim, representing the majesty and sovereignty of God. But in 1 Peter 5:8, he cautions us to, "be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour". So whilst lions can be strongly identified with strength, justice and royal authority, they can also be seen as something to be wary of, seeking our destruction.

And what of unicorns? They seem to proliferate in modern culture, iridescent with pastel horns and manes, and widely marketed towards young girls. They are said to symbolise purity, untamed freedom, fierce independence and divine grace across various cultures and historic eras. In Chinese mythology, the Qilin resembles a unicorn and symbolises good fortune, serenity and prosperity. In Alchemy, a unicorn was used to represent the pure spirit and unity of being, and modern culture has adopted it as a symbol of pop-culture whimsy, magic and individuality, as well as an inclusive symbol for the LGBTQ+ community. Of course, those of you with Scottish connections will recognise it as a national emblem; Celtic mythology viewed the Unicorn as a symbol of purity, power and an untameable spirit that would rather die than be captured. In Scottish heraldry, unicorns are depicted with gold chains, representing the immense and dangerous power

of the beast being safely reined in. You may be surprised to hear that there are references to unicorns in the Bible, although many modern translations replace the word with 'wild ox,' 'aurochs' or 'rhinoceros', to match modern zoological understanding. When the King James Bible mentions unicorns (such as in Numbers 23:22 or Job 39:9–10), it is describing a real, powerful creature known for its physical strength and inability to be domesticated by humans, far removed from the cuddly, Disneyfied creature that lures the unwary into dangerous territory today. But there is also a tradition in Medieval Christian symbolism that viewed the unicorn as an allegory for Jesus Christ, whilst the maiden who tamed it represented the Virgin Mary. Despite its association with gentleness, purity and innocence, the creature was also seen as fierce, wild and incredibly strong – capable of taking down larger beasts. Its single horn was believed to purify poisoned water and cure sickness.

When I was given the imagery of lions and unicorns, I think I had a vague notion of the lion being a sort of Aslan, Christ image and the unicorn as a New Age icon. But I hope that what I have laid out is far more nuanced and less clear cut. Both animals have positive as well as negative connotations, featuring in different cultures and belief systems with different interpretations and characteristics. And this actually fits well into our series, because the spotlight this morning is on paganism and witchcraft, but just as we have seen different understandings of lions and unicorns permeating cultural belief, the danger that has to be highlighted this morning is that of syncretism.

Syncretism is the combining or blending of different beliefs, cultures, or philosophies into a new, unified system and is prevalent in our modern society. And this is where the woodworm comes in. I wonder how many of you have brought home, or been given, something in apparently good condition, only to discover, sometimes years later, the tell-tale holes surrounded by fresh sawdust, or even nondescript moth-like creatures flying around your home? I know they are part of God's creation and have a place in the natural order of things, but I really would rather they were not in my home, particularly as it is timber framed! Once in, it can be extremely difficult to eradicate, it can lie undetected for years, then break out with a vengeance. And so with the Church, it can be infested with wrong thoughts that lie undisturbed for years, quietly subverting the Word of God and preventing His will from being completed within the community. In time, that fragility can lead to complete destabilisation. Our intention is always to glorify our loving God and not be tempted by the lures of evil; the challenge to us this morning is to root out syncretism in our thinking and our culture, especially within the Church. So hold that in mind as we look at the basics of two distinct but overlapping systems which are strongly condemned in the Bible, yet influence modern secular thinking and strive to embed themselves within the Church.

I was still at school when Religious Instruction, which was exclusively Christian, morphed into Religious Education and broadened into teaching many different faiths. By the time I was training to be a teacher (in a Roman Catholic college,) we were encouraged to seek out Bible stories that were also found in Judaism and Islam, such as Noah. This was the development of the idea that we all share the Abrahamic tradition, and the insidious acceptance of Islam into UK culture. Lynn is far more qualified than I to highlight the dangers of this approach; as you add Buddhism, Hinduism and other belief systems into the mix and if you are not careful, you can end up with a generalised view that it doesn't really matter which religion you follow, because we're all going up different sides

of the mountain to the same God. But Jesus said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life, no-one comes to the father except through me." (John 14:6)*

Alongside this subtle and not so subtle erosion of the Christian underpinnings of our society, we had the rise of the New Age movement. It became fashionable for young people in particular to travel to far flung corners of the globe to 'find themselves.' Meditation morphed from dwelling on the word of God to emptying yourself and either looking within for enlightenment or deferring to a generic 'higher power.' And increasingly, we found the paraphernalia of mystical belief systems permeating our culture - dream catchers, spell casters, ouija boards, unicorns, mermaids, fairies, gnomes and, of course, the now ubiquitous Harry Potter. Every year Halloween seems to be given more attention and the representation is always that of fun, something to be celebrated and enjoyed – because, as we know, Satan masquerades as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14).

The concept of 'control' seems to underpin much of the current resurgence in pagan belief. These days it is packaged in cutesie sounding slogans to 'find your authentic self,' to 'be empowered,' 'everything will work out for my highest good,' 'I am becoming the best version of myself' – it's all me, me, me and, where God is mentioned, He is very much defined by human aspiration, which is a far cry from the Living God whom we worship. But we need to be aware of how insidious this language is – how easy it is to say, 'Thinking of you' instead of, 'Praying for you.'

A number of people have sent me 'positive thoughts' in recent months - all well intentioned, but what exactly do they mean? Any more than 'positive thinking' can truly change the course of things in a way that is honouring to Almighty God. There are numerous reports of a 'positive attitude' being an important factor in combatting serious illness, and the NHS is partnered by numerous 'holistic' approaches branded as well-being; carers are offered 'pamper days' featuring aromatherapy, reiki, massages which often incorporate Eastern religious trappings. Mindfulness and yoga are presented as legitimate tools to combat stress and encourage relaxation, and are often welcomed as an alternative to yet another prescription drug with various side-effects. And, by and large, the Church has remained silent, unaware or reluctant to flag what should be obvious dangers. Those who have been embroiled in the New Age before being saved (such as Doreen Virtue) warn that the allure is that these appeals to what we should recognise as a demonic entity often seem to bring some affirmation. In the same way that a gambling addict will tell you that the worse thing that ever happened was their first win, because it encouraged them to do it again and again until it becomes a compulsion, so an apparently positive outcome to a tentative dip into new Age thinking reels the individual ever deeper into its belief system. But the language of the New Age movement, along with the belief systems of pagans and the burgeoning interest in witchcraft and sorcery, is becoming embedded in our culture, and the challenge for Christians is to guard against it in our lives; while the challenge for the Church is to recognise where it has encroached, and weed it out.

So what exactly do we mean by 'paganism?' It is a broad, umbrella term encompassing a wide variety of modern religions, that draw inspiration from the pre-Christian traditions of Europe, North Africa and West Asia. Modern pagan beliefs range from pantheism (God is in everything, so everything is God) and monotheism, to

polytheism (many gods) and atheism. Britannica tells us that many modern Pagans view their traditions as "nature religions" or "Earth religions," in tune with the planet's rhythms. Modern Pagan groups often collaborate to combat discrimination, contributing to a collective identity.

Pagan religions place greater emphasis on ritual practices than on specific beliefs, often conducting ceremonies outdoors or in homes. Many involve offerings to deities, spirits, or ancestors and celebrate seasonal or astronomical events, viewing their traditions as "nature religions", closely tied to the Earth's rhythms. Think of the focus on Stonehenge at the summer solstice. The word comes from the Latin paganus, meaning a person from the countryside or a rural village, a 'country bumpkin.' But as early as the 4th century, as Christianity grew in Roman cities, city dwellers used the term for rural people who kept practicing older, polytheistic traditions. For centuries, Christians used 'pagan' to describe anyone who did not follow Christianity or Judaism. Most modern pagans see the Earth and nature as sacred, viewing the planet as a living system rather than something to conquer (or, as Christians would say ,to be stewarded). Much of the current hysteria about Climate Change falls into this category. Many pagans worship multiple gods and goddesses, while others practice animism—the belief that all living things, rocks, and rivers possess a spiritual essence. Paganism usually has no central leader or strict holy book. It places high value on personal experience, seasonal festivals, and rituals. Modern (neo) pagan movements include:

Wicca; a modern nature-based religion that honours a goddess and a god, often featuring magic and ritual cycles.
Druidry; a tradition inspired by ancient Celtic spiritual practices, focusing heavily on nature, poetry, and peace.
Heathenry / Asatru: Movements that revive and adapt the ancient pre-Christian religious traditions of Scandinavia and Germanic Europe.

In contrast, Witchcraft is an active practice or set of techniques used to influence outcomes. It is the practice of magic, rituals or supernatural powers to influence events, heal or interact with spiritual forces. The core focus is upon spell casting, herbalism, rituals and energy work. The important distinction is that it is an art, a skill, or even a hobby rather than a formal faith. It is something which is done, rather than a belief system. It can be practised by anyone, be they pagan, Jewish, atheist, agnostic, or (rather chillingly) Christian. Even though the Bible expressly forbids it.

I have a friend who tells me that her grandmother was both staunch Chapel and a medium. This would have been in the Valleys in the aftermath of the Welsh Revival; how did that happen? Traditionally, Witchcraft referred to using occult powers to cause harm, bring bad luck, or explain sudden tragedies, like disease and failed crops. In medieval and early modern Europe, authorities often linked witchcraft to heresy or the devil, leading to severe trials and laws. Despite negative associations, historical practitioners often served local communities as folk healers, herbalists, and midwives. Today, witchcraft often describes nature-based spiritual paths and religions like Wicca, incorporating tools like candles, crystals, and herbs. Many modern practitioners view the craft as a positive, life-affirming way to set intentions, meditate, and connect with nature, rather than invoke dark forces. But the Bible expressly condemns witchcraft, sorcery and related occult activities, viewing them as spiritual rebellion and an abomination to God.

There is both distinction and overlap between paganism and witchcraft. It is possible to be a pagan and not practice magic, or a witch who follows a mainstream religion. Some people choose to follow both paths, and use witchcraft as a tool within their pagan spiritual life. Some traditions in Wicca combine both elements, by acting as an earth-based religion (Wicca) that incorporates practical magic (the craft.)

The Church in Colossae is a prime example of a Church that started well and lost its way, blending Christian teaching with local Phrygian beliefs, folk Judaism and pagan mysticism. They believed they were 'enhancing' their faith by adding outside ideas. What might be described as 'Gospel plus' these days. This is the only letter Paul wrote to a Church he had never visited, and the warnings he gives are extremely relevant today. Colossae was a busy, multi-ethnic trading city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) with Phrygian, Greek, Roman, and Jewish populations, creating a very pluralistic religious environment. The local Phrygian Folk Religion was rooted in the fear of elemental spirits or evil powers controlling daily life, and relied on the use of objects, symbols and rituals believed to protect against evil, bad luck, or harmful spiritual forces. Common examples today might include; wearing evil eye beads, rabbit feet or jade pieces, hanging a horseshoe over a doorway, carving building marks (protective symbols like daisy wheels or pentagrams over doorways), touching wood, or crossing your fingers to stop bad luck. Mystical/Folk Judaism observed strict ascetic rules (a lifestyle of strict self-discipline and abstention from worldly physical pleasures, as a form of 'mind over matter' subduing of the body to concentrate on the spiritual), strict dietary rules, new moon festivals, Sabbaths, and a hyper-humility that emphasised angel worship. Think of ultra-legalism, with a smattering of the 'guardian angel' trend, that proliferates today. Pagan mysticism incorporated ecstatic visionary experiences and secret initiation rites meant to grant higher spiritual knowledge.

Paul argued clearly that adding rituals, magic or angel veneration to Jesus actually subtracts from His work. Christ created all spiritual powers, triumphed over them on the cross, and holds all divine fullness. He warns against being taken captive by 'hollow and deceptive philosophy' or 'persuasive arguments,' noting that these ideas rely on human tradition and the 'elemental spiritual forces' of this world, rather than Christ. He refutes strict legalism and asceticism, "do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day." (Colossians 2:16) He mocks the strict, man-made ascetic rules being imposed on the community, specifically quoting their commands: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!' He argues that these rules lack any real value in restraining spiritual failure. He confronts Angel worship and visionary mysticism, with people going into detail about what they have seen in visions, puffing themselves up with unspiritual minds. Scholars note the Greek word used here for entering into visions was a highly specific technical term used in local pagan mystery cults for spiritual initiation. He proclaims Christ's victory over spirit powers, countering the fear of hostile cosmic spirits by declaring that, on the cross, Christ disarmed the powers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them by triumphing over them; turning to magic or intermediate spirits for protection was entirely pointless.

My father in law's beloved cricket bat was infested with woodworm and eventually crumbled to the touch, when we cleared the garage after his death. The ancient church at Colossae eventually faded from history as the city itself declined, suffered severe

earthquake damage, and was later abandoned or absorbed into nearby settlements. May God preserve the Church here - and the United Kingdom - from a similar legacy.

Amen