

The Feast of St Michael and All Angels, 29th September 2019

St Mary's, Barnes

Revelation 12, 7-12: John, 1, 47-end

Angels and are a familiar feature of the art and literature of Europe. And there is as a powerful depiction of Michael the Archangel lancing the dragon by Jacob Epstein on the outside walls of the Coventry Cathedral. But what are we to make of this today? When I was a young ordinand, I once attended Evensong on this day in a small country church in Wales. The preacher, a visiting professor from a nearby university, read out the story from Revelation about a great war in heaven, pushed the bible across the ledge of the pulpit so it made a great thump against the ledge, and said “Well you can believe that lot if you want to”. Ok, let’s go along with him. You don’t have to believe the mythology. But what truth is this ancient myth of Michael and the dragon trying to convey? I would suggest the following four truths.

First, as T.S. Eliot put it

The world turns and the world changes,
But one thing does not change.
In all of my years, one thing does not change,
However you disguise it, this thing does not change:
The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil.

Secondly, in a world that is warped, askew, there are many forces in the zeitgeist, the climate of our times, that will warp our minds unless we are careful, which will lead us astray.

Thirdly, however, a decisive victory has been achieved over the power of evil. In the face of venom, and through death, Jesus lived his life in unbroken union with the Father and in his Resurrection, this was revealed to be an eternal union. available for us to share in.

Finally, the grace that flows from this union of God and humanity in Christ lives now in our lives as we bear witness to Christian truth.

In today's short first reading from the Book of Revelation, all this was put, if you like, in mythological terms. The book was written during a period of fierce persecution against Christians about the year 90. It depicts the forces of evil lined up against Christians, accusing them. But as it said, a great victory had been won by the blood of the lamb, enabling them to witness faithfully, and the heavens greatly rejoiced. And it is important to note that this is still a very real situation for so many Christians in the world today, living as minorities in hostile environments, harassed and persecuted for their faith.

Today's Gospel reading gave us another vivid picture involving angels. Drawing on the wonderful Old Testament story in which Jacob dreamt of a great ladder ascending to heaven with a ceaseless flow of angels going up and down it, Jesus says to Nathaniel "You will see heaven wide open and God's angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man". It is a powerful way of making the third point I have just mentioned, that in Jesus the Son of Man, the true human being, there is an unbroken union of God and man, earth and heaven.

So, we might say, there are core truths which do not change, and there are ancient mythologies and images in which these are sometimes dressed. In unpacking the mythology, we seek to get at the core truth. But I would want to add a third way of thinking about this imagery- what I would call imaginative realities. This involves opening our minds to other possibilities, other dimensions. We do this every time we read a novel or watch films. Novel reading involves opening ourselves to another world. I have not watched Game of Thrones, but this clearly involves the viewer being taken out of themselves into another world. All this involves what Coleridge called "a willing suspension of disbelief". We put aside our normal assumptions about what is possible and not possible and allow ourselves to be entranced and taken into another realm. In a related way this happens that every time in the Eucharist we say: "Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we proclaim your great and glorious name". We allow ourselves to be taken into another reality, another dimension. However sceptical we might be with part of the mind; we rightly allow ourselves to be lifted in heart and mind into a

reality beyond our full understanding. But is this a reality, or in the end, just a lovely fiction? I find the following points weigh with me.

If God has created us there is no reason why he should not also have created angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven. Who are we to limit what God can create? “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Then I have always been struck by Sebastian’s response in Evelyn Waugh’s novel *Brideshead Revisited* when he is interrogated about Christmas

“But, my dear Sebastian, you can’t seriously believe it all.”

“Can’t I?”

“I mean about Christmas and the star and the three kings and the ox and the ass.”

“Oh yes, I believe that. It’s a lovely idea.”

“But you can’t BELIEVE things because they’re a lovely idea.”

“But I DO. That’s how I believe.”

Angels are a lovely idea, and Sebastian would certainly have believed in them for that very reason. Angels, both in idea and art have a special beauty, at once classical and Christian. Keats is not quite right to say that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” but beauty, which take us out of ourselves and draws us beyond ourselves, points to the one to whom Augustine prayed as “O thou beauty most ancient and withal so fresh.

There are imaginative fantasies. But I would suggest there are also imaginative *realities*- which take us into what is real, but which cannot be pinned down in ordinary language.

Many people believe in Angels, 73% of Americans do for example, down slightly from the 80% of a few years ago. In the UK, a third of the population believe they have a guardian angel, with one in ten claiming to have experienced one, double the number of people who claimed to have experienced one in 2010. But if you don’t believe in angels, what is the point of this language? I sum up by making two points.

The language of angels keeps our minds and hearts open to the possibility of realities beyond the understanding of our limited minds; open to the unfathomable depth and riches of the Divine Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being. When the priest says, “Lift up your hearts” and we reply “We lift them to the Lord” with lift them with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven.

Secondly, in the Bible, angels are above all messengers of God. Gabriel comes to Mary and tells her she is to give birth to the [Messiah. The reality behind this is that for the believer there really is converse, communication, between heaven and earth. The great ladder with angels ascending and descending on it, which Jacob saw in a dream, which Jesus told Nathaniel he would see in him, is also planted in our hearts and minds. Incorporate in Christ, as we are, there is converse between heaven and earth in is.

Our needs can take us into this heavenly communication. Francis Thompson the poet lived in dire poverty for most of his life, selling matches in Trafalgar Square. A poem she wrote begins

The angels keep their ancient places—
Turn but a stone and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

It continues

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry—and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

As a friend at theological college said to me once “Our needs are angels.” Or take another example. Let us assume you are having your usual period of quiet in the morning. Simply being still, quietening the mind, being open, receptive.

Then you think of someone you haven't thought of for a very long time and pray for them. You decide to ring them up after breakfast. Their phone rings, and they answer “That's funny I was just thinking

of you. I am so glad you rang, there's something I would very much like to talk to you about." What has happened is that the Spirit of God, who dwells in you, working through your normal processes of mind and good will, but enhancing them, had led you to take a step which turns out to be a blessing to both of you. You might have said afterwards "An angel spoke to me", and perhaps you did. Or you might have said, "The Spirit of God within me, prompted and guided me. Either way, this is the familiar experience of Christians as they wait upon God in stillness, quietening the heart and mind, receptive and open. For with our lives rooted in that reality, blessings, sometimes ordinary, and sometimes surprising, definitely happen.