

‘Waves that beat on heaven’s shoare’ – A Homily for Michael & All Angels

Genesis 28.10-17

Revelation 12.7-12

John 1.47-end

‘To see a world in a grain of sand,
and a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
and eternity in an hour...

The bleat, the bark, bellow, and roar,
Are waves that beat on heaven’s shore.’

So begins Tate Britain’s introduction to their William Blake exhibition as animated images of his paintings move across the cityscape of London. Blake understood that ‘everything that lives is Holy’ and he sought through his poetry and art to break down the easy divide of human and divine, body and soul, the sacred and the secular. Even as others look to the Bible to police a narrow or fraught morality, Blake reminds us that it is ‘filled with Imaginations and Visions from End to End.’ The Bible with its visions of heavenly realities and colourful portrayals of goodness and blessing, danger and woe, is not a work to be read flatly or with literal eyes, but rather with the imagination of the heart. Surely no feast more than Michael and All Angels shows us the truth of his vision?

Charles Taylor a contemporary catholic philosopher in his amazing work, *The Secular Age*, says that the general sense in our modern cultures is that something has been lost, and that this something is any sense of the transcendent. This brings a radical disenchantment of our world in which we now relate to things in terms of

resource and use, but also heralds a new sense of loneliness and isolation as we feel cut off from meaning, from each other as a cosmos teeming with life and purpose cools into a lonely universe in which we find ourselves adrift.

But an authentic Christian vision challenges such a lonely disenchantment. To see something of the heavenly reality all around us, we only need to strain our vision and look above us this morning. High above the east end reredos, we can see four angelic figures, each carrying symbols of divine majesty and might: orbs and sceptres, censers and swords. These angels carry with them the meaning of a world full of presence and purpose, and are heavenly messengers of faith, hope and love.

The three named angels of our Scriptures all reveal something profound about this divine presence. They remind us that we are not alone, cut-off and adrift in some faceless social or economic system, but that our world is radically open to the promise and challenge of God's presence and movement, that our very lives can be opened out to the powers of heaven themselves.

First we meet Michael, the 'One who is like God'. Whenever we encounter the Archangel Michael in our Scriptures, he is a warrior. Whether he's leading the charge of the angelic host as they battle through the demon hoards to get a message to the prophet Daniel; or whether he marches with the armies of heaven as the ancient serpent is thrown down in defeat in the book of Revelation, the archangel Michael is a sign that our world can indeed be a place where injustice, prejudice, hatred and violence are confronted and overturned by the powers of justice, courage and compassion.

All this reminds us too, that our Eucharistic celebration this morning is both a cosmic and a political act. Cosmic because it is a re-creation of our universe now with thanksgiving at its heart, political as the simple sharing of bread and wine

together as a gift challenges a dehumanising politics and economics that keeps the majority poor and seeks to dominate and control through wealth. Here we also come to understand the Eucharistic Prayer as a freedom song: taking up the themes of Abraham and Moses, singing of a God who takes peoples and communities out of slavery and poverty into a new world of dignity and freedom. In all of this, it is Michael who is leading the charge.

The second angel is Gabriel. His name means ‘Strength from God,’ and it is he who delivers the earth-shattering news of the incarnation to a young Jewish girl in the Gospel of Luke. This message is of a promise enfleshed, a promise that will turn the world upside-down, threatening those in power and comforting the poor and the outcast. This message is a message of peace to a world that has only known the whispers and roaring of violence.

Walter Brueggemann tells us how difficult it is for us to hear the offer of an alternative world. He says there are three reasons for this: first we have wrapped ourselves up in an economics of affluence in which we cushion ourselves from others pain; second we accept a politics of oppression where the cries of the marginal are dismissed as the noises of the marginal and the mad; and third we have created a religion of accessibility where God is so present that his radical freedom has been entirely domesticated.

Do you remember the film the Truman Show where Truman exists in an entirely fake world, created for him by the faceless corporations that now run things? It is only the intrusive voice of one who has loved him from the outside that enables him to sail through its boundaries and breach out into the truth. Perhaps it is the same for us, and it is Gabriel who represents this intrusive voice.

Our final angel is Raphael, whose name means ‘The God who Heals.’ We

encounter him in the wonderfully eccentric book of Tobit, where he is a companion and healer to Tobias and his dog. Raphael reminds us that God is already at work in the deepest areas of our lives, desiring that we become reconciled to ourselves in all our fracture and dislocation. He also reminds us that God is seeking to heal and restore all our human relationships, personally as we open ourselves up to the possibilities of forgiveness, and socially as displaced people and displaced lands find their homes again.

It is easy to wound and to be wounded in this fragile world. Too easy to strike out at another out of fear, distrust or prejudice, that to open ourselves out in vulnerability and trust. But God comes to us in our woundedness and gently calls us back into life. The archangel Raphael reminds us that it is God himself who is the wounded healer, reaching down to us in the humanity of Jesus, allowing himself to be broken open by the misplaced violence of the world, and putting us back together again in love.

Into our neat, ordered and closed off worlds comes the power and presence of heaven. This presence speaks of the confrontation of the powerful and the dominant and the restoration of justice and peace; it speaks of the necessity for us to hear a word of justice and truth from beyond ourselves; it speaks of the Wounded Healer who lovingly stoops down to heal and restore us. Such yearnings are 'the waves that beat on heaven's shore.'