

St. Michael and All Angels 2019 (29.09.19)

Revelations 12: 7 – 12; John 1: 47 – end

I don't know whether anyone here has ever been "angel bombed." Do you know what I mean? I guess many of us have heard of photo-bombing: when you get a nicely arranged group photo and someone runs along just as the photo's being taken and pushes their head into the picture. It's a bit like gate crashing a photo. But have you heard of angel bombing?

My father died a few months ago. And two or three times shortly afterwards my mother got angel bombed. She'd come home – because she's always out, do she'd never be found in – do you remember Margaret Thatcher describing home as the place you go back to when there's nowhere else to go? Well, my mother's remarkably like Margaret Thatcher in everything apart from her political affiliations – so she'd finally get round to going home, because there was nowhere else to go, and on two or three occasions after my father

died she found, on the kitchen window sill, a knitted angel with a note from a different church on each occasion where people know her to say that they were thinking about her and praying for her. And that is the phenomenon of angel bombing. It'd be a good project for the Priory's Chat and Craft group, actually, wouldn't it.

These knitted angels are helpful to us today, though, because they help us connect up the popular image of angels – with white robes and wings and a halo sitting on a cloud playing a harp – with the idea that an angel is an agent or a messenger of God. And it's a good job we've got something to help us because our Bible readings are difficult: the Revelation of John and John's Gospel. The scholarly jury is out on whether they're the same John or not. When we say John, does John mean John, or does John sometimes mean another John? Well, the scholars argue until they're blue in the face about it, but at times they're equally inaccessible to us.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

These scriptures were written in a different place, at a different time by and for people with a completely different mind-set to our own. So perhaps the starting point for us trying to use them today is just to accept that they are difficult and we're unlikely to be able to understand them because the sort of critical faculties we use to understand things don't work when we try to apply them to apocalyptic prophecies of the late first or early second century.

If you ask somebody whether they believe St. Michael and his angels beat the devil in a fight and threw him out of heaven, they would say that of course they don't; and they're likely to ask you whether you think they're stupid. And that's because they're treating the question the same way as they would if you'd asked them whether they believe William the Conqueror beat King Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

But just because we find parts of the Bible difficult, though, is no reason to abandon it. We find bits of the

Bible difficult because the way *we* understand things, in this particular day and age, is inadequate to cope with the Bible, not because the Bible is load of rubbish.

So we need to accept that we're not going to understand everything in the Bible, keep on reading it, allow God to speak to us and when our mind-set can no longer keep up with it, just put it down and don't worry about it any further.

Do I believe heaven exists? Not the way I believe Newcastle-upon-Tyne exists. Do I believe the battle of Revelation chapter 12 occurred? Not the way I believe the Battle of Hastings occurred. Do I believe I'll ever see heaven open and angels ascending and descending? Not the way I believe the 121 bus goes up and down the road to Driffield. But do I believe the Bible is true? You bet I do, every word of it, and I believe God has more to say to me through it than I'm ever going to be able to get my head round.

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What I know this passage in Revelations 12 says, figuratively perhaps, but more succinctly and more comprehensively than the treatises of a thousand psycho-analysts ever could, is that there is a fundamental conflict at the heart of what it is to be human. And when that conflict leads us into pain and brokenness and regret, it's not because we're human failures: it's just because we're human. And when we know that we've messed up spectacularly and are perhaps having to count the cost, we flatter ourselves if in our self-pity we allow ourselves to believe we are any worse than anyone else. We're all just human beings, moggling along, caught somewhere between heaven and hell.

And Revelations 12 tells me that the key to existing in that condition is worship: to hear the loud voice out of heaven and to join with angels and archangels to sing God's praise and receive once again the story of his salvation. When we do that our Gospel reading this morning from John chapter 1 comes alive for us.

Earth connects with heaven. As that connection takes place, earthly things are transformed and assume a heavenly reality. Bread and wine becomes more than the sum of their chemical elements: they become Jesus, present in reality to us. The heavens are indeed opened and the angels ascend and descend upon the Son of Man. That is sacrament.

And another encounter through sacrament is finding a knitted angel on your window sill when your husband's just died. It's more than a quantity of wool ingeniously manipulated into the form of a recognisable shape: it's a connection with the love of God. It doesn't take away the pain, but it equips us to endure it. There's plenty of angel bombing to be done, one way or another.

Amen.