

St. Michael and All Angels 2019 Evening

Daniel 10: 4 – end; Revelation chapter 5

Today is the Feast of St. Michael and all his angels. I preached on this theme at 8 o'clock and 10.30, and for that matter in a somewhat dumbed down version at the Baptism at 12.15; and the problem is when you preach on a theme that by the time it gets to Evensong you've somewhat shot your bolt. You end up saying pretty much the same thing again unless you're an expository preacher and take each reading apart verse by verse.

Well, most people here probably know me well enough to know that's not how I preach. Although I must say there was one verse in Daniel chapter 10 which merited some detailed examination. We're told that the man in linen whom Daniel saw had a body like beryl. I don't know how many Beryls you've known, but I don't think I've ever known any with "arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze". I have to say,

though, that I have met a few who speak like the roar of a multitude. It did nevertheless send me scurrying for the dictionary, so if you learn nothing else from the Rector's ramblings today, let me just tell you that a beryl is a "transparent precious stone of a pale-green colour passing into light-blue, yellow and white; distinguished only by colour from the emerald."

Now look, the thesis is that these readings are really weird and whacky. In fact this evening's readings are even weirder and whackier than this morning's. This morning I was saying that we shouldn't worry if we can't understand the readings because you need the sort of mind-set we've lost to be able to do so. This evening I want to go even further and positively say that we shouldn't even try to understand what we've read this evening.

Often, in the age in which we live, a symptom of mental ill-health is an obsession with trying to de-code the meaning of passages like this. We shouldn't do it.

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We're not meant to go there. But that doesn't mean that we should throw the baby out with the bath water and never read Daniel 10 or Revelation 5. We should read it, but we should resist this temptation to analyse it and try to pull it apart to work out how it works. This obsession with empirical analysis, which we pride ourselves on – we are the age of physics and chemistry and engineering and technology – but this age that we're perhaps just on the cusp of leaving is the product of only the last 350 years or so. It is the Modern era.

But these scriptures were written in a different time at a different place by people whose mind-sets were completely different. We can't work with the genre of fantasy. We tend to dismiss it as childish and something to be grown out of; or the exclusive reserve of nerds. I think the closest I've got to fantasy is Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast trilogy, although I do remember simply devouring them as an undergraduate. But whenever that's cropped up in conversation before, people have tended to be rather

condescending and say that that really is young people's sort of literature.

In the era when scripture was written people weren't fazed by this sort of thing. It spoke to them in an easy, natural and accessible way. So we must try not to be fazed by it either. In fact we should just allow it to wash over us and leave us with an impression of the absolute otherness of God; and relax into the assurance that we are held in something which is much bigger and much more glorious than we can comprehend or articulate.

The point I was driving towards this morning, though, was that the notion of angels is that we are invited to know a connectedness with this other realm. We are invited to enter into this fantastical other world and to join our voices with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven to participate with them through our worship in the sort of worship we read of in Revelation 5,

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So today's theme leads us to an invitation to worship. Now people come to church for all sorts of different, equally legitimate reasons. They come to proclaim the Gospel so others may receive salvation through Jesus Christ. They come to learn and have their biblical knowledge and theological understanding expanded. They come for fellowship with other people. And they come to be inspired and equipped to live in a way that challenges injustice and violence in whatever form it takes. All that is absolutely right: we come to church for all those reasons. It would be a dysfunctional church that didn't minister God's grace in each of those ways to some extent or another.

But today, perhaps just for today, but today the emphasis is upon the point of worship being to create a connection between heaven and earth; of allowing ourselves to be transported by worship into the very heart of heaven; and of then carrying away with us a vestige of that with which to live purer, more hopeful lives. Amen.