

St. Michael & All Angels 2020 (27.09.2020)

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

Today we celebrate the Festival of St. Michael and All Angels. If you were here last year, you may recall we had what, I think, was received as a rather delightful sermon all about “angel bombing.” It arose out of the anecdote of my mother being angel bombed after my father had died. She’d come home to find that people had put a knitted angel on the window sill by the back door to show that they were thinking about her and praying for her. And there arose out of this, here at the Priory, a veritable cottage industry – or perhaps I should say cottage ministry – of using knitted angels as an expression, perhaps a sacramental expression, of our pastoral ministry, before coronavirus came along and put a stop to it.

I’m afraid this year’s sermon is going to be a bit heavier, but please don’t switch off. It’s just that, this week, reading the passage from Revelation 12 we’ve

had this morning, I’ve been visited quite forcibly by the memory of being in a Bible study group approaching 25 years ago. We weren’t looking at this passage, but a propos of whatever we were talking about, someone referred to Revelation 12 as if it were the chronicle of an historic event; as if it were in the same category as William the Conqueror winning the Battle of Hastings and Henry VIII having six wives: there was, once upon a time, a battle in heaven; the devil lost and got thrown out; he now has a rival kingdom to God’s. The person who said this was not a rabid fundamentalist. He was a perfectly reasonable chap. And I have to say I was dumbfounded: I felt unequal to saying anything; and afterwards and subsequently have wondered what I could and should have said in the face of such a frankly fatuous reading of Revelation 12.

We’re increasingly sensitive these days to the fact that different people think and learn in different ways. Some people have a preference for learning through

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words, either hearing them or reading them. Some people are preferentially visual thinkers and learn best by looking at pictures or diagrams. Some people are preferentially kinaesthetic and learn in a hands-on way by doing practical things.

There can be no doubt that St.Paul favoured words. He would have trained as a Pharisee by sitting at the feet of rabbis and listening to them. He exercised his evangelistic ministry arguing in market places and synagogues throughout the near east. And he encouraged fledgling churches by sending them letters stuffed full of densely worded argument. From those letters the protestant reformers developed the doctrine of justification by faith. It's all there, to be found, in Paul's epistle to the Romans . . . if you're able to navigate your way through the words which are, if truth be told, at times impenetrably dense. And if you're a visual thinker, you're going to struggle.

But fear not: help is at hand. St.John the Divine was a *visual* thinker. And he tells us what he saw; what was revealed to him as pictures and visions. The Book of Revelation is full of the phrase "I saw." I saw this, in saw that, I saw the other. What St.Paul presents to us in densely worded argument, St.John presents to us in pictorial format.

Life is beset with an existential struggle. We all know this to be true as we live with what it is to be human and wrestle with human nature. But the struggle has already been won. And the victory is ours to realise by committing our life to Christ, thereby savouring a foretaste of what is not yet fully known. And St.John presents this to us in glorious technicolour picture language full of angles and dragons and serpents, a dramatic fall to earth, and a plea not to "cling to life even in the face of death" but to let the victory of Christ live in us, and to rejoice with those who dwell in heaven.

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There is a cliché used in dieting and slimming regime worlds, so I'm told: you are what you eat. There's a great deal of spiritual truth in that. As we respond to St. John's plea to rejoice with those who dwell in heaven, we hear the words of Jesus: take, eat, this is my body. We are what we eat. We become the body of Christ who was born for us, lived for us, died for us, was resurrected for us and who ascended into heaven for us. So, draw near with faith, receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which he gave for you; and feed on him, in your hearts, by faith, with thanksgiving. And, to use a purely pictorial figure of speech, let's cast down the devil and trample him underfoot.

Amen.