

St Michael & All Angels

Genesis 28.10-17; Revelation 12.7-12; John 1.47-51

A sermon preached by Nick Moir at St Andrew's Chesterton on 29 September 2013

In the last year or two I've reflected quiet a lot on the figures in our stained glass windows and I've decided that my favourites are the angels. Look at St Michael in the great east window. He looks much like the rest of the figures – except for his wings. He is a like us but set part from us because he can fly – he can rise above this earth with all its squalour and pain and compromise and drudgery. He can fly with those wonderful iridescent red wings and be transported to a realm above us, not to abandon us to our fate but to give us a glimpse of the possibility of that other world, that greater reality – and, boy, do we need that sometimes. Most of us don't see angels – just a chosen few – and not always the holy ones. William Blake, the artist and poet, saw angels all his life. Born in 1757 he had his first vision when he was about eight. He told his mother he had seen a tree filled with angels "bespangling every bough like stars." She gave him a good thrashing. His father thought he was imagining things, but saw his potential for art and encouraged that. Blake grew up to be a highly heterodox believer and his personal morals left a lot to be desired but he still saw angels and other visions. Peter Ackroyd wrote a biography of him in 1996. He has no particular religious axe to grind but concludes that there is no reason to doubt either Blake's truthfulness in speaking of his visions and neither is there the slightest reason to doubt his sanity. And when I say visions I don't mean dreams or some sort of hypnotic state. For Blake the angels were as real as his wife or mother. In his mid-40s Blake lived for three years in a small cottage at Felpham on the Sussex coast where he saw angels descending on a ladder from heaven to his cottage:

Away to sweet Felpham for heaven is there:
The Ladder of Angels descends through the air
On the turrett its spiral does softly descend
Through the village it winds, at my cot it does end.

He painted that vision, enjoyed a sense of connection with heaven, and wrote the words that we now know as the hymn 'Jerusalem'.

It was Jacob in our Old Testament reading who first saw that ladder. He saw angels, but he wasn't one: he was a trickster, a cheat, a fugitive from justice. You don't have to be an angel to see them, it seems. In Jacob's story they mark a turning point, a reminder that despite Jacob's past and despite the multiple flaws of his character, his life was to be part of a greater story that thousands of years later millions of us are still telling – a story whose most important moments involve the company of angels leading us from the earthbound to look up as they, via wings or ladders, link earth to heaven.

St Michael is not the only angel in this church with red wings. There is the one on the term card who hovers above the Perry window at the east end of the south aisle. Some of you will remember me speaking of that window before. Samuel Perry was vicar here during the great restoration of the church at the end of the 1870s. The window he paid for pictures the little children coming to Jesus – as he had bidden them to. Often that text and this scene is used in connection with the font in Anglican churches and with infant baptism, but here there is a sad story. The window is given in memory of Perry's first wife, Frances, who died at the age of 33 following the birth of their child Mary Kate who was buried with her in the churchyard a week after the birth. Vicar's wives used to be rare in Chesterton. Up until Perry's bachelor predecessor and since the Reformation, our vicars

were fellows of Trinity College, most of them bachelors, but at the end of the 18th century there was another married vicar, William Mansel, who went on to be a famous master of Trinity and Bishop of Bristol. For ten years he lived in the parish – also rare in those days – and raised a family, a large one if you examine the parish registers. But in 1803 the burial registers reveal that not only Isabella, his wife, died at the age of 36, but also his twin daughters Catherine and Mary. I suspect they're all buried in the vault in that corner of the church and I suspect that Mr Perry knew that when he added his own window in the same space. It's sad but not gloomy – look at the faces in Perry's window. Two young women bring their children to Jesus and he receives them and blesses them. A man – a husband perhaps – puts up a hand to stop them but the children and their mothers are safe and secure because welcomed and loved by Jesus. And above the scene floats the angel, inviting us to lift up our heads and our hearts to another reality, a greater vision.

Mansel and his wife were here in Chesterton presiding over the church community when Anna-Maria, the orphan of the anti-slave campaign Gustavus Vassa the African, came to live and be cared for in our community. They were here too when she died and was laid to rest in the churchyard. Next to her grave is that of our oldest memorial to a named person either inside or outside the church. Her name was Frances Brigham, daughter of one of our landowning families of the 17th and 18th centuries. She died in 1674, aged 9. Her tombstone is striking, so much so that it features in a couple of publications. On it is a skeleton, who looks as though he's enjoying himself. He's almost dancing. He is Death. In one hand he holds a spear with which he is lancing one that seems to be a child, as though he's saying 'I can strike suddenly, at any time'; in the other hand he holds an egg-timer – he's saying to us, 'I'll get you in the end'. Macabre indeed. But above, if you look carefully because age has worn much away, above to the left and the right are two angels hovering. Look up and you will see that Death does not have the last word.

For this is a Christian place. This is where we come from our earthly lives, some of us pretty devout and holy, some of us not really; a few of us who have seen angels, or at least have had some compelling experience of the divine that we know what the visionaries are talking about, and some of us who haven't but feel compelled enough by the shared experience and inherited wisdom of the church that we find refuge in the hope that the church holds out. Some of us are attuned to angels, signs, sacraments; for others its words – for words can be angels too: Scripture, most importantly, but sometimes other words too, those ones on the Vassa memorial always get me:

she is gone and dwells in that abode,
Where some of every clime shall joy in God.

Words have wings sometimes and bring us to the gates of Heaven.

And we don't need to be good to hear them any more than William Blake or Jacob were good when they saw angels. I think Robbie Williams gets it – and he'd be the first to put his hands up and admit that he is hardly a saint. His song 'Angels' was voted the best song of the past 25 years and significantly, has been voted number one as the song people would most like to be played at their funeral. There are more people out there who will sing this song regularly than who sing hymns regularly and for whom it will make many more spiritual connections than 'All things bright and beautiful' ever will.

When I'm feeling weak
And my pain walks down a one way street
I look above
And I know I'll always be blessed with love
And as the feeling grows
She breathes flesh to my bones
And when love is dead
I'm loving angels instead

Google the song and you'll see no end of attempts to explain the words of the song. I think you just need to hold on to the fact that angels still speak to people in our culture of another world and of a greater reality – and it's in those lines: 'when... my pain walks down a one way street I look above and I know I'll always be blessed with love'. I think Jacob knew that as did William Blake, as did my widowed predecessors.

This evening I'm going to talk about the angels of St Andrew's that are way above us. Stewart has kindly photographed them for me and we're going to look at them, but we're also going to do some serious medieval spiritual angelic theology in the company of one Thomas Gallus, the founder under Cardinal Guala of the Abbey of Vercelli to which this parish was first linked 800 years ago. I think he can help us learn what to make of angels, archangels and all the heavenly hierarchy. Is it all medieval fancy? Are angels just for the superstitious and simple-minded? Come and be prepared to look up....