

A sermon preached by Nick Moir on the 1st Sunday of Lent 2014

‘And suddenly angels came and waited on him.’

Last Saturday I led a quiet day on the theme of angels. Some of what I shared you have heard too – when I preached at the Feast of Michaelmas, Michael & All Angels, back in the autumn. I told them about William Blake who saw angels all his life including the ladder to heaven that reached down to his cottage in Felpham with the angels ascending and descending upon it.

Blake wrote:

And I know that this world is a world of imagination and vision. I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike... The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way”.

Our educated culture has lost much of its capacity to see angels because of the iron grip of Reason has scared them away. I think the capacity to see angels requires a fertile imagination, which our culture tends to dismiss, along with the concept of myth, as something pre-modern: so we regard a figment of someone’s imagination as something to be dismissed and when we say something’s mythical we’re probably saying that it’s either untrue or just doesn’t exist.

When I have spoken about angels recently I have had responses afterwards from sane, rational people telling me about their experience of angels. This week, for instance, I had a letter from one of those on the quiet day telling me about when she was seven years old. Let me read you a bit:

One day I walked alone up the track we called the Potato Field, and turned into the park. Some way ahead of me, beside the wood, was a very large holly tree. As I looked at [it] I heard intensely beautiful singing, and a flock of birds flew in and out of the branches, but the singing was not birdsong. I realised I was hearing angels singing. The birds rose and fell out of the leaves and circled the tree. I stood gazing and after a while the music ebbed away and the great tree was still.

Now you might say that this was just in her imagination, a seven year old child. And I’d agree with that except for the word ‘just’. It struck me as a very Blakean experience.

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The Walt Disney version of Winnie the Pooh – which I don’t usually rate much against the original – begins by exploring Christopher Robin’s nursery. The camera pans around and you see the stuffed toys that are the inanimate companions of the real life Christopher Milne: a small upright pig, a bedraggled looking donkey, a pert looking tiger, a kangaroo and its offspring, and, of course, a bear. In the imaginations of Christopher Robin and especially his father, A A Milne, these toys have ceased to be lifeless cloth and stuffing: they are much loved characters that have warmed the hearts of generations of children and their parents.

Now wind back two and a half thousand years. The author is the writer of Genesis chapters 2 and 3, often labelled J by scholars as though he were a character in James Bond. The nursery is the Jerusalem Temple or, more exactly, its central sanctuary, the House of God which is also the Garden

of God for it is decorated with trees and flowers interspersed with the cherubim. And there too, it seems were the seraphim, for it is they that come to life in the vision of a prophet in the Temple:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

What did a seraph look like? Well, every other time it is used in the Old Testament it doesn't refer to an angelic being but to a snake. It means literally 'burning one' or 'fiery one' and probably refers to the effect of its bite. Images of snakes appeared in temples of the time and were often looked to for healing from the attentions of their animate brethren. The children of Israel in the wilderness, you may remember, had a serpent on a pole that they looked to for that very purpose. In that case the serpent was not a god but a sort of angel, mediating the presence and healing of God. It is as angelic figures that these seraphs adorned the temple in the prophet Isaiah's time. They are attendants of the Lord, who lead the worship of all creation uttering the three holies that we still join with at every Eucharist, following their script. They are serpents with wings –which the Greeks called drakontes. But in Isaiah's imagination these dragons, these fiery, burning ones, were not evil menaces but the leaders of the heavenly choir, the director of music and organist wrapped into one.

But by the end of Isaiah's life these seraphic dragons had been banished from the Temple. 2 Kings 18 reports that Hezekiah instituted a series of Protestant reforms to the national religion:

He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole (the Asherah). He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it.

It seems that the serpent and his mates had got above their station; instead of being the leaders of worship they were receiving worship themselves. And for that they are thrown out of the Temple. But not before he enters the imagination of another biblical writer, our friend J:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.

If the temple is the nursery then the Garden of Eden is the Hundred Acre Wood; it is the nursery brought to life, the temple in the form of mythology.

Over five hundred years later that expulsion from the presence of God in the Temple is played out again in the imagination of another prophet, alone and in exile on the island of Patmos – we're into the book of Revelation.

War broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

In Heaven there is victory, won by the blood of the Lamb, but on earth all hell is let loose. John saw in the awful events of his day the reality of evil: that what was at work wasn't just wicked men and sometimes women but somehow a greater evil was at work. I thought of that as I read the obituary yesterday of Alice Herz-Sommer, who died a few days ago at the age of 110, the oldest known survivor of the Holocaust. She survived concentration camp because she played Chopin and her performances were allowed to persuade the Red Cross that the camps were humane. Before her arrest she had seen her elderly mother transported away to her death. She and her husband and son were sent to another camp but even before they left they had to watch their neighbours making off with their furniture and pictures.

In 1962, when she attended the trial of Adolf Eichmann, she felt only pity for the war criminal. 'What the Nazis did was a terrible thing,' she said, 'but was Alexander the Great any better? Evil has always existed and always will.'

She recognised that the evil was greater than its perpetrators. That evil is still at work in our world with all its guile and ferocity. The situation in the Ukraine may be disturbing but I think we should be more worried about what's going on in North Korea, where according to a United Nations report there are 120,000 political prisoners in concentration camps where parents are being murdered and children are being mutilated and raped in a living Hell. This is the stuff of the book of Revelation, the dragon in all its fury wreaking havoc.

This is uncomfortable stuff, but perhaps we need to remember that before Jesus enjoyed the fellowship of angels he had to spend forty days and forty nights in rather more disturbing company. Lent is the time for looking evil in the face, for feeling its presence, so that in the end we may triumph through the power of the cross – as St George did, whose feast and victory over the dragon we celebrate, appropriately enough, in Easter week. So before, like Jesus, we enjoy the company of angels, we may need to be prepared to look evil in the face, to encounter it in our imaginations, and to conquer it through him who rescues us.