

Looking around the stained glass here at All Saints there are many representations of angels. Most of them are beautiful, androgynous, winged pre-Raphaelite figures in their nightwear, the only exception seems to be Michael the Archangel who makes an appearance in the Lady Chapel tucked away behind our Lady of Walsingham. Both Michael and Our Lady counter the dragon in the 12th chapter of the Book of Revelation perhaps that's why they are together. Michael as we heard this morning defeated the dragon whilst Mary is often depicted with a serpent under her foot, an allusion to the creation story in Genesis: God's tells the serpent 'I will put enmity between you and the woman.' As Our Lady of Walsingham, Mary is often depicted with her foot on a frog, as she is here, there aren't many serpents in Norfolk. I often feel rather sorry for the poor harmless frog. Anyway, back to Michael he is clearly male, and a warrior, with huge wings. I did notice however his rather almost melancholy look, I sense humility and magnanimity in victory, the attributes we require of our warriors of whom Michael is patron. They are to be peacemakers as Michael is the bringer of peace to the heavenly realms, a peace proclaimed on earth by the angels in the Christmas story. Angels are nearly always depicted as winged celestial creatures in Victorian glass, it's how we envisage these heavenly creatures, but we don't often experience such figures do we, well I don't anyway! There are times we need to do some re-envisioning.

Some of you may have heard of third person syndrome. It's not a literary technique, but the sense that someone else is present with us. Where two or three are gathered in my name I am there in the midst of them said Jesus. I have been enjoying some TS Eliot this week, in his poem *Wasteland* he writes:

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
—But who is that on the other side of you?*

Some have reflected on this when reading the account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus and many folk like those two disciples when faced with extreme hardship or danger have felt the presence of a third person: guiding, encouraging, allaying fears, bringing comfort. Ernest Shackleton wrote of sensing a third person during his explorations.

Among my favourite pieces of scripture is the Apocryphal Book of Tobit and it is here that we encounter not a pre-Raphaelite beauty but an ordinary person, the Archangel Raphael becomes Azariah, son of Hananiah and accompanies Tobiah the son of Tobit on his difficult journey. Raphael is a healing presence and is often associated with the art of healing and hence is associated with the angel who stirs the healing waters of the pool of Bethesda in John's gospel. So angels are messengers of healing as well as peace; and in this way they are mediums of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a word widely used today in many contexts, particularly in our own nation, but the word finds its apotheosis in the incarnation, that which is at the very heart of our faith - the reconciliation between God and us. We heard today in that rather strange conversation between Jesus and Nathanael that angels are instruments of the incarnation. Now we already know that to some extent, we for whom the Angelus comes so readily to our lips,.... *as we have known the incarnation by*

the message of an angel! But clearly there is more going on here. Nathanael is impressed by Jesus ability to know about him, his super human knowledge, but Jesus tells him he will see greater things than this. He will indeed experience the bridging between heaven and earth, this angelic role.

But first Nathanael must overcome his cynicism, his is a very modern 21st century response, it resonates with us, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' For us to be able to grasp this angelic vision, to sense that third person, assuring us of Christ's presence in our midst, and from there for us to be incarnational, we must lay aside that cynicism that lurks so near.

I have just come from a parish dedicated to Philip, the apostle. The Parish motto was 'Come and see' the words of Philip to Nathanael; they are words with angelic tones, they are the antidote to Nathanael's cynicism.

The vision that Jesus speaks of is of course that of Jacob's dream in the book of Genesis. Jacob is the Israelite with guile that Jesus alludes to, Nathanael will indeed see greater things than the Patriarchs. Malcolm Guite, the Chaplain to Girton College, Cambridge, wrote of this event in a sonnet:

*A fugitive and exile, Jacob slept,
A man of clay, his head upon a stone
And even in his sleep his spirit wept
He lay down lonely and would wake alone.
But in the night he dreamt the Heavens parted
And glimpsed, in glory, as from Heaven's core,
A ladder set for all the broken-hearted
And earth herself becoming Heaven's door.

And when the nameless Angel named him Israel
He kept this gift, whose depth he never knew;
The promise of an end to all our exile,
For now a child of Israel finds it true,
And sees the One who heals the deep heart's aching
As Jacob's dream becomes Nathanael's waking.*

What then of us, we who live in a cynical age. We need to be ever open and aware to an angelic message, aware of the third person; particularly when things are difficult or unpromising. It might surprise us, in fact if it doesn't it probably isn't fair dinkum! Raphael appeared as an ordinary human being and became a mentor to Tobiah, no doubt Gabriel appeared to Our Lady in much the same way. As for Michael – perhaps many of us have known a peacemaker. Our first reaction to angelic messages may well be one of incredulity, cynicism even. How can this be, what good can come from St Kilda! But echoing St Paul we need to 'test everything.' Is this a message of healing and reconciliation, is it a message of peace, is it a message with echoes of the incarnation, is it awakening in us something beyond that which we had thought possible, is it a message that somehow opens up new possibilities, does it enable us to glimpse a vision of the Kingdom, is it a message born out of humility and magnanimity? If the answer is yes, then we need to turn to God in prayer and to each other in the angelic words of Philip...Come and see! Amen.