

26/29 September 2021: Week 17 After Trinity

A Sermon for St Michael & All Angels

Genesis 28: 10-17; Revelation 12: 7-12; John 1: 47-51

'Making room for Angels' - Michael Brown

'Thouhast set my feet in a large room' (Psalm 31: 9b - BCP)

Wednesday of this week is the feast of St Michael & All Angels. Today we're going to 'anticipate' the festival. And that means a brief foray into the Book of Revelation.

Well now, who's that writing? - It's John the Revelator!

Tell me, who's that writing? - It's John the Revelator!

Oh yes, who's that writing ? - It's John the Revelator!

He's the one who wrote the book of the Seven Seals.

('Call-and-Response' type chorus)

These words come from a gospel blues song sung by Blind Willie Johnson who was a Baptist minister, slide guitarist, and singing evangelist. The Golden Discs fastened to the sides of the two Voyager space craft as they make their way through interstellar space contain one of his other songs. Some of you may think this a fitting destination for such music but these words can serve to remind that it is no ordinary book which has a section devoted to the opening of seven seals. Its visions have inspired all sorts of responses none of which can ever fully explain the contents of this writing which completes our scriptures.

The book of Revelation is sometimes called the 'Apocalypse'. This may seem a peculiar title but it is in fact more informative than the usual name. Revelation is the only example of its kind in the New Testament but 'Apocalyptic' writings as they are termed were a quite common type of literature in the first century.

Apocalyptic books can be set on earth and in heaven, and can move between the two. Animal and number symbolism can be used, e.g., the fabled '666'. These books are often named after famous people from the past. The Book of Enoch (not in the bible) is perhaps the best known example and it is sometimes used to give background information for studying the NT writings.

But before we go any further, here is a question: *Do Angels Really Exist?*

'Michael' as the name of an archangel only occurs in the Bible five times but angels are everywhere. If we look closely enough, we can even see angels on the cover of our service booklets for the Trinity season - there is a copy on the church website if you haven't got one. The 'men' who visit Abraham at the Oak of Mamre are often taken to be angels which is how the great icon painter Andrei Rublev came to depict them as symbols of the Trinity.

But of course to say we must believe in angels because they are in scripture is not going to convince everyone who comes to church. And even if some of us were to say over coffee one Sunday morning, 'Last night we saw angels', the most charitable response to us might be, 'Well now, don't you mean you had a vision of angels?' with the unspoken implication, 'Perhaps you thought you saw angels but you must have been deluded?' And so instead of christians asking outright whether angels exist, a better question might be: When is a vision not a delusion? with the answer: When it gives us a christian truth.

We can find examples of this answer in some verses from two of today's readings.

Genesis 28: 10-17: Jacob's Dream at Bethel

²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' ¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place!

On a visit to a magnificent cathedral, we might use the same words as Jacob and say, 'Surely the Lord is in this place', but Jacob is not being moved by any sense of beauty, he is acknowledging the truth that an encounter with the holy God can come upon us unawares and can be terrifying.

Revelation 12: 7-12: Michael Defeats the Dragon

⁷And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹The 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.

There is a strange omission in this passage which is even stranger than the events being described. How can the devil, the personification of ultimate self-centred evil, be defeated by mere angels? Surely the only person who could do this would be our Lord? Yes indeed, and of course John the Revelator knows that the real victory has already been won on the Cross and he is reminding us of this christian truth.

But let's go back to the original question '*Do Angels Really Exist?*', expand it into two propositions and ask ourselves what would be their consequences.

First Proposition: Angels couldn't exist. Second proposition: Angels may exist.

If we believe that angels definitely couldn't exist, what does that say about our universe and the place of human beings in it? It would surely mean that the whole of reality would be reduced to physical properties, to what could be measured or counted. It would make no sense to say that people had an 'inner life'. But if we believe that angels may exist, then we are open to the possibility that there could be non-material spiritual beings in the universe.

The mention of the Voyager space craft at the beginning of this sermon omitted an essential word. The words 'interstellar space' should have been '*God's* interstellar space'. For as the Nicene Creed reminds us: 'I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, *And of all things visible and invisible...*'. Amongst those '*things ...invisible*' God is free to create spiritual beings such as angels but would only do so '*for our salvation*'.

Jesus invites us to visit an art gallery set in a wide room with pictures depicting all the possible aspects of christian belief. But he does not ask us to complete a questionnaire on our artistic knowledge before allowing us in. He says, 'Come and see. I hope you like at least some of these pictures right now. One day I hope you may like them all. But there is no hurry. You have all Eternity.'

AMEN