

Places of Encounter

Well, my friends, what are you doing here? What are we all doing here?

None of us should be here! According to a prophet in Africa, this past Tuesday was the day of the Rapture, this was seized on by, guess who, American conservative evangelicals and the internet and social media exploded! If you're not familiar with the idea of the Rapture, bask in your ignorance which I'm about to break for you I'm afraid. It is the idea that before Jesus' second coming all the faithful will be caught up into heaven, removed from the evil world so that God's wrath can be poured out. Based, very loosely, on one verse in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (4:17) and some of Jesus' more obscure sayings it didn't really start to take hold until the mid-19th Century. For certain brands of Christianity the Rapture is front and centre, a longing for the return of Christ, not that we will see God's reign in full but that we will be taken away from the evil around us, oh and of course proven right and get front row seats for the outpouring of God's wrath on all those who didn't listen to us, the wicked left behind.

So, what are we all doing here? We're either the wicked left behind or the rapture didn't happen and never will. It is the latter.

Year C
St Michael and All Angels
Genesis 28:10-17
Revelation 12:7-12
John 1:47-end

So far so good, that's one ridiculous idea put to one side. And then we come to today's feast, St Michael and All Angels. We have readings of ladders between heaven and earth, of angels playing snakes and ladders, of dragons in the desert and of Jesus seeing and knowing people before they've met. Maybe we are just the same as the rapture lovers! But in fact, this feast concentrating as it does on angels and archangels is counterintuitive; it doesn't take us out of the world; it places us firmly back into the world, it allows us to look with hope for a future with God and it gives us the stability to live out that hope in the present and in this place.

It's rare that you get a Sunday with a reading from the beginning of the Bible and one from the end! Both, alongside the gospel have mentions of angels and heaven and earth. We are in the realm of the cosmic, our sight has been lifted beyond earth to see the mysteries of heaven. This is a dangerous place to be, there is a temptation to continue staring at the mystery and forget about everything else or to lose patience with the mystery and look for certainties that aren't there.

That is indeed the danger of the Christian doctrine of eschatology, the study of the last things. So, we walk a fine line this morning between holding a mystery

and not looking for certainties but hope. Our gospel reading is the key to understanding both Genesis and Revelation.

In meeting Nathanael, Jesus plays on the story we heard about Jacob in Genesis. “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” That’s a direct comparison with Jacob the great deceiver of our faith who steals a blessing and a future. And then Jesus goes on to say, “you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man,” clearly an allusion to the Jacob story. The truth is we don’t know what the angels are doing, in neither story are we told! What Jesus does do is replace the ladder with the Son of Man. Jesus uses this term of himself to identify with other human beings, but it also has a rich background of a heavenly, kingly, glorious, apocalyptic figure in the book of Daniel.¹ Alongside this in the Synoptic Gospels we have themes of the suffering Son of Man.² What seems to be clear in Jesus’ replacing of himself with the ladder is that he is saying that he is now the only connection, the only route between heaven and earth. But in using a term that references future suffering Jesus is warning that this ascent and glorification are by way of the cross.

¹ David Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, p.59

² *ibid*

Jacob is astonished by the place he is in; the reading uses the word place 5 times and land twice. There is clearly a link to physical place here. Marilynne Robinson has written “Jacob is right that there is something holy in that place, and wrong to find the *place* holy rather than the moment and the circumstance of his own investment by God with the covenant of Abraham. The Lord tells Jacob that He will be with him wherever he goes. All places are the same.”³ In John’s gospel it is no longer the place Bethel that is important, as in the Jacob story, but the person of the Son of Man.⁴

That is of course the point of the Incarnation, God reveals Godself in a particular person, in a particular place in a particular time, the scandal of particularity. The transcendent God becomes immanent. The incarnate Jesus becomes the place of encounter with God, the place of God’s presence.

In Revelation we get a different picture of place. The devil is cast out of heaven and thrown to earth: earth becomes the arena for the cosmic battle between good and evil, and earth is where the battles is won. The problem with

³ Marilynne Robinson, *Reading Genesis*, p.146

⁴ C K Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.187

eschatology is that it is tempting to ignore earth and look to the cosmic. It is tempting to look to Michael, warrior of heaven, Gabriel, messenger of God, Raphael, the healer, and all the angels as our hope. But “in theological terms John places Christology at the heart of eschatology: the most important thing about the ultimate future is not when or how it happens but trusting the one who is central to it, Jesus; and the focus as regards time is not on the epic end of the world but on the ongoing drama of loving now”⁵ here in a particular time and place.

“Not only at the end but also from the very beginning, Christian faith and theology look to the coming glory of God and the fulfilment of the promise of God contained in the gospel and person of Jesus Christ.”⁶ Christian faith is expectant faith, it is hopeful faith, it is the faith of “thy kingdom come,” we are an Advent people and our cry is “Come Lord Jesus.” It is hope because we know heaven is open and not shut. In the sacraments heaven is opened to us, in baptism and the Eucharist the Spirit is poured out of an open heaven, God’s presence is made manifest.

⁵ Ford, *op cit.*, p.59

⁶ Daniel L Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, p.331

And this hope is manifested in time and space, here and now in this place.

Each of us are the incarnation of the gospel, each of us is called to live in hope.

That begins with how we pray and how we live, we can start by praying for our neighbours, our street and widen out from there. So, practically we are going to start praying for our streets every day in Morning Prayer, and you can join in in your private prayers, we'll share the list. Because as we pray for people and places, we are invested in them.

We can start being hopeful by not giving in to gloom but stirring up our hope in the consummation of God's purposes for all of creation.⁷ That is the hope that tempers our grief as we mourn the loss of our brother Ray, that is the hope that drives us to work for justice and peace, that is the hope that drives us to live well as part of God's good creation, that is the hope that challenges us to live as God calls us to live with the gifts and abilities God has given us.

The Feast of St Michael and All Angels, or Michaelmas, is also a time for ordinations. All of the priests vested this morning were ordained at Michaelmas, some of our other retired clergy may have been as well. The

⁷ *Ibid.* p.330

ordinal for deacon, priest and bishop emphasises place. As deacons we are sent into the forgotten corners of the world so that the love of God may be made visible. As priests and incumbents, we share in the cure of souls of a particular place with our Bishop. Bishops are called to be the place of unity and oversight, preparing God's people to stand before God when the day of glory comes. Ordination has a view to the particular, people and place, and a view to the future day of glory. I will have to give an account of how I loved, led and liberated all of you, how I opened heaven to you in the administration of the sacraments and the preaching of the word.

Somehow in this feast we take all the talk of mystery and the cosmic, of the angelic and the heavenly and we distil it down to walking sacraments, you and me. In the vocation each one of us has we are become the encounter point between earth and heaven in this place. And let's be very clear, when we say this place, we don't mean this physical building, we mean this community, these people we live amongst. Solidarity with the people of Berwick or wherever we may come from, as Christ showed solidarity with humanity in the Incarnation and ultimately in the cross.

Jacob said, surely God is in this place, and I did not know it. Sometimes we do not know that God is in the place where earth and heaven meet: ourselves.

Michael and the angels are there to minister to us, to protect us, to give us the strength to live and fight with hope. The Holy Spirit is poured out on us to give us strength to stand in solidarity with the whole creation and with all humanity groaning for emancipation from sin, suffering, and death. We are given the strength to be people and places of hope, to combat the fear so prevalent with the hope, love and grace of God.

That is why the Rapture is not and can never be good theology. We are here because this is where God wants us to be. We are here because there is work to do, there is hope to give, there is fear to combat. Angels and Archangels might support us and cheer us on and fight the hidden battles we are not always aware of, but it is you and I who are the place of God's dwelling on earth. Surely God is in these places gathered here this morning, let the people of Berwick know it.