

Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



The Hierarchy of Angels

Ash Wednesday

Reading: Colossians 1: 5-20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body,

the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Commentary

The Ash Wednesday liturgy reminds us, ‘Remember you are dust and unto dust you shall return.’ It is a good moment to contemplate our place in the scheme of things as human beings. The Christian faith teaches us that God has made us, that we are creatures, but also sons and daughters of a loving Father. God has placed us as stewards on earth with responsibilities to love God and our neighbour and to take care of the creation of which we are a part. Yet the Nicene Creed takes us further as we affirm: ‘I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.’

On this Ash Wednesday, we are being asked to reflect on the (usually) invisible part of the universe, the unseen world, as we consider the window in the west end of the South aisle (*to the left as one enters the church*).

The theme of this window is the ‘**Hierarchy of Angels.**’ It is designed by James Powell and Sons, who were closely associated with the leading Arts and Crafts architects and designers of the day, such as Burne-Jones, William de Morgan and William Morris.

It is dedicated to Howard Unwin JP, a civil engineer (1837-1911) who for twenty years was Managing Director of the Earl of Shrewsbury’s

company in London which supplied pneumatic tyres for Hansom cabs: the Shrewsbury and Talbot Noiseless Tyre Company.

Beginning Lent by reflecting on angels is a fitting subject for a church dedicated to the Holy Angels. 'Angels' in the Scriptures are messengers, or agents of God, but this is what they do rather than what they are. Dr Margaret Barker, a Hebrew scholar comments that angels express 'the greater reality that is just beyond our rational perception.'

The Scriptures tell us that they exist to praise God and that human beings who experience their presence are directed to the praise and service of the Almighty.

The different kinds of angelic beings mentioned in the Bible were categorised certainly by the 4th century and influentially by the late 5th century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. It was his central thesis that God is light and it was his writings, centuries later, which were to have such effect on Gothic architecture.

In his work, 'Celestial Hierarchy,' Pseudo-Dionysius describes a schema of nine orders of angels. Five of these are mentioned in the letters of St Paul: principalities, powers, virtues, dominations and thrones. And, of course, there are then angels, Archangels, cherubim and seraphim, who are mentioned in the Old Testament, the Gospels and the Book of Revelation.

Pseudo-Dionysius separated these nine orders into three ranks:

Highest Order - Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones

Middle Order - Dominions, Virtues Powers

Lowest Order - Principalities, Archangels, Angels.

There is an intimation of this in the hymn 'Let all mortal flesh keep silence,' based on the ancient Liturgy of St James.

Rank on rank the host of heaven

Spreads its vanguard on the way,

As the Light of light descendeth

From the realms of endless day,

That the powers of hell may vanish

As the darkness clears away.

(translated from Greek by Gerald Moultrie 1829-85)

Within our window, we see depicted the nine types of angel and, over the next nine days, we will consider each of them and what they might say to our sense of Christian discipleship.

Margaret Barker writes of angels, and of us, 'Mystics and seers have heard their song, and those who respond to the angels' message move inevitably towards the harmony the angels represent, 'the peace on earth' of the Bethlehem angels. By joining the song of the angels, human hearts and minds are connected to the power of the invisible creation, and their lives are renewed.

Meditation

The Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham writes about the need to rediscover ‘the community of creation’, so that as humans we might re-find our place alongside, rather than separate from, our fellow creatures. As we ponder our place within creation, meditate on this verse from Psalm 139: **‘I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.’**

Prayer

Father, we give you thanks and praise your holy name because the splendour of your faithful angels and archangels shows us your greatness, which surpasses in goodness the whole of creation.

So as the hosts of angels rejoice in your glory, we give you, their Creator, glory and worship.

In adoration and joy we make their hymn of praise our own:

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts,

Heaven and earth are full of thy glory.

Glory be to Thee, O Lord, Hosanna in the Highest.