

Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



Cherubim

Friday after Ash Wednesday

Reading: Exodus 25:10,11, 16-22

The LORD said to Moses...have (the Israelites) make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them. In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it. They shall make an Ark of acacia wood; it shall be two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high.

You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside you shall overlay it, and you shall make a moulding of gold upon it all round... You shall put into the ark the covenant that I shall give you....

Then you shall make a mercy-seat of pure gold; two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its width. You shall make two cherubim of gold; you shall make them of hammered work, at the two ends of the mercy-seat. Make one cherub at one end, and one cherub at the other; of one piece with the mercy-seat you shall make the cherubim at its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy-seat with their wings. They shall face each other; the faces of the cherubim shall be turned towards the mercy-seat. You shall put the mercy-seat on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the covenant that I shall give you. There I will meet you, and from above the mercy-seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.

Commentary

Cherubim are the second in the first rank of the angelic hierarchy and are the most often mentioned in the Scriptures. Cherubim have four wings as distinct to the six-winged seraph.

In Western Art, the cherub became associated with the putto, a naked, winged, chubby male child which in Baroque art, for instance, represented the omnipresence of God. However, this is not how they are described in the Scriptures.

Cherubim are first mentioned in the Book of Genesis where, after Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden, ‘God placed the cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.’ (Genesis 3:24).

Later, in the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet has a vision (chapter 1) where he sees the cherubim transporting the throne of God. He depicts them as having four faces, representing the four spheres of God’s rule: that of a man (humanity); that of a lion (wild animals); the ox (domestic animals); and the eagle (birds of the air). They have legs and hands and four wings; they move quickly and ‘they sparkled like burnished bronze.’ These four ‘faces’ (which return in the Book of Revelation, chapter 4) would in Christian times be the images that represented the four Gospels: Matthew (human); Mark (lion), Luke (ox); eagle (John).

Images of the cherubim were also dominant in Solomon’s Temple. We get a glimpse of what this might mean from the Book of Exodus where we read that God told Moses to create images of the cherubim at specific places around the Ark of the Covenant, where the two tablets of the Ten Commandments were kept. The Ark was a symbol of God’s presence with His people during their wanderings in the wilderness and was afterwards kept in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Ark of the Covenant was kind of container. Its lid was known as the ‘Kapporeth’ or ‘mercy seat’, and was bedecked with two cherubim, between which God promised to meet His people.

Often in the Old Testament, God is described as ‘enthroned above the cherubim’ and it refers to the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant.

Rowan Williams points out that in John’s Gospel the description of the empty tomb contains two angels seated one at the head and the other at the foot of the grave slab (John 20:11). St John is recalling here the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant flanked by the two cherubim, the space where God was said to dwell. This place, this ledge has become the place, the ultimate place, where God has met His people.

Meditation

To ‘see’ God, writes Rowan Williams, is to look into the gap between the holy images.’

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is imagined as having created spaces from the very beginning – sky space, earth space, sea space, and then invited the spaces themselves to bring forth life.

On Easter morn, at the dawn of the new creation, what first presents itself to the disciples is a space – that is, an ‘absence’, an empty tomb, the space where the corpse was. And that space signifies that what’s been created through Jesus’ paschal journey is a new space through which God brings forth new life. This is a space no longer hemmed in or constituted by the fear of death and the threat of annihilation. For the power of death over life has been broken. Jesus is risen.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you know how to prepare your disciples to experience your presence deeply and know you intimately. I ask today for a deepening in my faith in your resurrection. Let me find today that space in me, which is life giving and life affirming, and may all the events of my life point me to the truth that you are alive. Amen