

Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



All Souls Chapel Window (South side)

Monday in the Fifth Week of Lent

Reading: Revelation 12:7 -12

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

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,

‘Now have come the salvation and the power

and the kingdom of our God

and the authority of his Messiah,

for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,

who accuses them day and night before our God.

But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb

and by the word of their testimony,

for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

Rejoice then, you heavens

and those who dwell in them!

But woe to the earth and the sea,

for the devil has come down to you

with great wrath,

because he knows that his time is short!’

Commentary

The 'Michael' window was designed by Martin Travers (a local resident, now believed to be one of the most influential British stained-glass artists of the 20th century) and was dedicated in 1917. Each panel has a separate dedication. Today we are focusing on the bottom two panels, which depict St Michael fighting the Dragon (Satan) over the city of London. One can see St Paul's Cathedral, the Tower of London, the River Thames and even some Bedford Park houses. One of the panels is dedicated by M.E Barrow in memory of her parents and the other in memory of 'the Unfriended.'

Why is Evil represented as a dragon?

The name 'Satan' means 'accuser,' or 'adversary.' In the Book of Job, he is presented as a kind of lawyer, a prosecutor in the Divine court of judgement, someone who opposes or accuses humanity before God. The English word 'Devil,' (from the Greek word 'diabolos') give us the sense that he is a 'slanderer,' someone who attacks the reputation of another, vilifying, disparaging and undermining them. It is easy to see how such words could be applied to the malicious inclinations of human beings. In the Passion story, for instance, it is said of Judas 'Satan entered into his heart,' meaning his inclination was now set for the betrayal of Jesus.

At the beginning of Lent, we read in the Gospels of the temptation of Jesus by the Devil in the wilderness. Jesus is offered alternative ways of being the Messiah through the abuse of power, the avoidance of suffering and the manipulation of the crowd. 'All these things I will give

you if you fall down and worship me,' says the Devil. Yet, throughout this 'testing' Jesus remains obedient to the love of the one true God.

In the Book of Revelation, the Devil is called 'Satan,' 'the ancient serpent,' 'the slanderer,' and 'the deceiver of the whole world.' (12:9) He is represented as 'a great red dragon' with seven heads, ten horns, seven crowns and a massive tail. (12:4). This is the inspiration behind this window where he battles with Michael and is thrown down to the earth 'and his angels with him.'

Despite the fact that the Book of Genesis never mentions Satan, the serpent in the Garden of Eden has been interpreted as the Devil- 'the ancient serpent,' as Revelation calls him. Isaiah also talks of a monstrous sea-serpent, Leviathan, (also mentioned in the Psalms) who is used as a metaphor for the enemies of Israel, those who seek to destroy the people of God.

What is most striking about the Travers window, however, is the setting of the 'War in heaven' over London. It is 1917 when the window is placed in the Chapel. By this time, German Zeppelins had bombed Great Yarmouth, King's Lynn and even London itself. It is not so hard to imagine how these airborne weapons affected Travers' depiction of wickedness here – the Devil hovering over the City - and the hope it also represents in the Archangel Michael, that good would prevail and conquer evil.

The historian Christopher Klein writes:

“As London settled in to sleep on May 31, 1915, a monstrous airborne machine blotted out the stars of the British night. Using the glow of the River Thames as a guide, the biggest flying vessel ever constructed droned over the city. As a trap door opened from underneath the futuristic 650-foot-long craft, German troops sent 90 incendiary bombs and 30 grenades plummeting from the dark menace. London rattled. Explosions illuminated the night. Panic tore through the city.”

Meditation

In the Book of Revelation, Satan is a symbol of the reality of all that is opposed to God; of all that is hostile to, and wishes to diminish, humanity and spoil God’s good creation.

It is also a book that instructs us in the complex, corporate and institutional aspects of wickedness and evil. The embodiment of evil power is not merely a single king, but the imperial institution (Roman Empire) or structure, a whole way of ruling – a whole network of relationships and institutions that contribute to a pattern of life.

Today we hear regularly of institutional racism, systematic sexism, ingrained homophobia and prejudice against all manner of peoples and how these injustices and oppression are manifested (deliberately and unthinkingly) through the networks of which we are a part. The Church is not immune to such wickedness and evil and the struggle with such iniquity needs to be identified with as much precision as possible.

Baron von Hügel, a philosopher and famous spiritual director, who lived in London at the beginning of the last century, gave this spiritual advice to modern day Christians. Ponder on its meaning for your life as you read it today:

“...the reality of Evil is beyond any direct explanation by anyone – the true state of affairs here is not that believers can explain and that unbelievers cannot explain, still less that Christians cannot explain but that sceptics can. No: but that Christianity does, if something other, yet something more than explain Evil. Christianity has immensely increased the range and depth of our insight as to Evil; and at the same time, Christianity alone has given man the motives and the power not only to trust on, unshaken, in the spiritual sun, in God, in spite of these sun-spots of Evil, but to transform Evil into an instrument of Good.”

Prayer

Holy Michael the Archangel, defend us in the day of battle;
Be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the devil;
May God rebuke him we humbly pray,
And by the power of God, trample Satan underfoot
And all wickedness present in the world for the ruin of souls.
We make this prayer through Christ our Lord.

A prayer from Night Prayer (Compline)

Visit, we beseech Thee, O Lord, this house,
and drive far from it all snares of the enemy;
let Thy holy Angels dwell herein, to preserve us in peace;
and let Thy blessing be upon us forever.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.