

On the Angels

- a homily preached at Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle
for the Festival of St. Michael and All Angels 2013

- M**ost homilies on the angels try to do three things.
- a. The preacher tells us *angelos* means “messenger”;
 - b. We are told they exist and we’d better believe they exist ... or else;
 - c. And we are told that in the great biblical stories like the visit of the three Strangers to Abraham and Sarah, angels are synonyms for God.

Such is the stunning lack of interest in the Hebraic imagination for defining angelic qualities – that was left to medieval Christians who delineated the nine fold levels of angelic life that we’ve just sung about so beautifully in the Gradual hymn; who calculated the number of angels at well over 4,000,000 because every living thing had its own “Guardian” angel; and who claimed that angels were sexually neuter – such was the lack of Hebraic interest in angelic specifics that “angel” became just another way of talking about God’s rather odd ways with us.

So there is no need to pretend we believe in Angels as a separate species of life when we plainly don’t. There’s no need to imitate the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* and believe any number of impossible things before breakfast. Even 4,000,000 impossible things.

I’d like to take a different tack this morning and suggest that angels are by no means self-evident beings – “descriptions” of them seem all rather pointless to me (although New Age bookshops are very helpful in this regard) - but suggest that angels become an absolutely necessary piece of religious equipment and language whenever we contemplate seriously and are caught up in our ponderings. We are not alone. It is possible, it seems, to get so caught up with what is going on in our heads that we see other worlds, other species of being and for that we need to speak a new language. It said that Archimedes died at the hand of the soldiers he did not hear coming to execute him, so engrossed was he in a problem of higher mathematics.

My own experience of this kind of confrontation with angels is far less magisterial and memorable. Many years ago, in Melbourne, I was apprehended by a policeman for being over or very nearly over .05. With great weariness the officer said, “I won’t book you this time, Father, but for Christ’s sake grow up”. I’ve never forgotten it, and realised permanently that we can entertain angels unawares. Or even be entertained by them.

So while I think a clear definition of angels is rather fatuous and a kind of yearning that fairies may still live at the bottom of the garden, nevertheless I think we can understand their place in our experience by looking at three serious images, two within the Christian tradition and one outside it, and then linking them with the Call of the Apostles in the Fourth Gospel which was the Gospel reading for this festival.

The first is the famous icon of St. Andrea Rublev, the *Visitors to Abraham and Sarah*. In iconography the New Testament theme is often represented by its Old Testament archetype, a sort of OT trailer to the NT full length film. The Annunciation to Mary, for instance, is often represented as the Burning Bush. Why? Because as Moses' reluctant "Yes" to God began the great liberation we call the Exodus, so Mary's "Yes" to Gabriel's request began the human race's journey back to God. Mary's "Yes" begins the undoing of the "No" of Eden.



The Three Angels/Visitors are seated in perfect harmony around a central table, a sign of communality and concord. Together they re-present the *bene esse* of God - Trinity, a *communio* of Persons, a Society within

the very essence of God. The empty, open space in front of the table is for you, the worshipper, who recognises your calling (*vocare*) and destiny to eat with God ... or not, as the case may be.

The Father is on the left, gazed at in rapture by the others. It is in this sense that God is attractive, endlessly delighting and delighting in those he begets and this figure is the ground of all divinity, the *auto-theos*. (Abp. Rowan Williams, in a rare and lucid moment, says this is the only icon he knows that seems to have been drawn from life).

The central figure is Christ the Lord. He wears the shawl of the Rabbi, for he is the Teacher of the Human Race. He wears a stole over his right shoulder in the Orthodox tradition for he is the High Priest of Humanity.

The third figure is the Spirit pointing, with that formidable finger, down to the humanity she invests with power. She is like Shakespeare's Ariel and, like Ariel, she is clothed with the green of spring. Endless renewal.

The Angels here are very Christian ones. They have a function which is to include the human race in their ever-increasing joy. So let us remember, an icon is written not drawn, because it is a theological doctrine and a statement about God. It is not a portrait.

The second image is a portion of the Wilton Diptych. If you go to London and deliberately avoid its presence in the National Gallery at Trafalgar Square, I declare by all the authority invested in me that you will burn for ever in the lowest pit of hell in excruciating agony. (I hope that's not putting it too strongly)



A “diptych”, as its name implies, has two panels joined by a hinge, unlike the triptych that has its central theme painted in the middle of the three panels. Both triptych and diptych were mobile Aids to Devotion and only for the extremely rich.

The Wilton Diptych is one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen, except, perhaps, Dawn. In the left panel we find the kneeling donor, King Richard 2 with his patron saints. King Edward of East Anglia and King Edward the Confessor along with their patron St. John the Baptist. In the right panel are the immensely impressive angels who surround Our Lady holding the blessing Christ Child, wearing a cloth of gold. The diptych is almost too rich. Gold – the colour of Heaven and Divinity – is everywhere, but the eye is caught and trapped by the vivid ultramarine of the angelic vestments,

You cannot see it in this much reduced reproduction, but take it from me Christ has a small and modest navel, and this is theologically important. He is no ethereal magician or Athena springing fully formed from Zeus’ (or even God’s) head, but one “born of a woman”, and his body bears that sign of his humanity as later it will bear the wounds of his Passion that he carries with him into the Resurrection. The wounds are never healed, but they are powerless to hold him; the past is never forgotten, but it is redeemed. Perhaps one of the stupidest maxims we trot out every now and again is “Forgive and forget”. Short of a frontal lobotomy that would seem to be impossible, and unnecessary. It implies that forgiveness is a kind of amnesia, but the gospel tells a different story.

After the connections have been made – notice how Richard’s emblem of the White Hart is replicated on the angels’ robes – and after the wonderful *stillness* of the scene has sunk into us, we are left with that very practical hinge that somehow joins heaven and earth. The hinge links two worlds, angelic and human. But it does not open a vision of opposites seen as perfect and imperfect so much as a dream of complementarity. One world yearns for the other.

There is no such thing as “absolute” or “perfect” faith or, at least, I’ve never met it. In the main we pick up truthful and important things by rumour – half caught, half heard, half understood and always half digested. For most of us God is provisional, a rumour or which we cannot rid ourselves, a hinge that opens a gateway to freedom and other worlds. As Leonard Cohen growls in ‘Anthem’:

*Give up your perfect offering,
There’s a crack in everything,
That’s how the light gets in*

The final image is not religious at all. It is Herbert Badham’s *Breakfast Piece* and can now be seen in the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the same corridor as Grace Cossington Smith. It was painted in 1936 and Badham’s wife is the model. The newspaper in the bottom right hand corner announces War, the Italian push into Abyssinia, but there is something far more important than politics and violence going on here.



The woman is wondering what it’s all about. She is on

the edge of something within, and everything in the painting reflects that stance and disposition. Everything is expectant – the egg unbroken, the tea cup empty, the loaf uncut, the cigarette unsmoked. Everything is about to begin. A pale morning sun illuminates her face, and there is just enough formality in the scene – note that chequered cloth placed carelessly over the old mosaicked table – to let us feel what it might be like to live with angels and to be part of a larger world.

Yet if you could transpose the regal angels of the Wilton Diptych around the Australian, twentieth century woman, it is my hunch she would not notice them there at all. What she is pondering will remain forever hers (and private), but it seems to me she is not alone. Her lovely round face, resting lightly on her joined fingers is *looking in*, not at, but *in*.

And that pondering, that giving oneself up to interiority is how Christ call his Apostles in the Fourth Gospel. He doesn't name in that kind of role call of the Famous as he does in the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, but rather lets the gossip about him flow. The word gossip is etymologically linked the word Gospel, and here we have a narrative version of it. Vocation is anecdotal, calling a kind of (serious) chit-chat, belief comes out of speculation:

How do you know me?
I saw you ... *(as you've never been seen before)*

I think we've the Messiah!
Really? Can anything good come
from that place?
Come and see ... *if you dare, ... for we may have been "messed"*
without knowing it

Do people believe in God any longer? Those who say God is Absent hardly know the truth of which they speak.

As the Welsh priest/poet R. S. Thomas says in Via Negativa:

*Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.*

Roger Sharr