



Fourth Sunday of Advent
Sunday 18 December 2011

Heaven in Ordinary

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: 2 Samuel 7.1-11, 16; Luke 1.26-38

On Advent Sunday, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, preached for us here at St Martin's. He talked of our lives being poised between devils and angels: the angels who see life in relation to God and are full of imagination; the angels who see the potential of life within each one of us – those angelic eyes which can see everything and everyone around us as 'pregnant with God'. Yet on the other side, the devils: the way of seeing the world not in relation to God, but in relation to ourselves: the attempt to contain, control, to possess the world, to use it for their own profit and to stuff it into their own egos; the demons who would make us doubt the possibility of living in relationship with God, indeed who would undermine our ability to live in relation to anyone or anything.

And here is each one of us walking this path, balanced between an imagination which can set us free, and the fears which kill. I wonder if you reflected upon your own week, where you discovered your own demons and where you saw the angels? When did you lose sight of God, and when did you even perhaps for a moment open your eyes and see the angels?

Well, let me think back over my last week. A week ago in this church, we held the Commemoration of those who have died as victims of homicide. Simon Western, whose beloved son Fynn was murdered, led the reflection. He talked about the parable of the Good Samaritan, of feeling after the death of his son, that he himself was like the man beaten up and left for dead at the side of the road. He talked of those who walked past on the other side of the road not wanting to get involved. He talked of those who, it feels like, even kick you when you are down.

But he also spoke of the angels. This is what he said:

“These people, are sent by the mystery we call God, to reach out to you with love and friendship. They don't recognise that they are saints or angels, and may reveal all the usual human failings. Yet at certain moments the holy-spirit blows through them and they hold you.

In my grieving I have been held and loved, by people, and experienced moments of grace. Each day I have been sent beauty and hope: a walk by the river, a beautiful sky, the smile of a child, the kindness of a loving friend, a beautiful memory. Our task is to notice the beauty, for it is easier to pass it by when grieving. Our task is to recognise that the moments of friendship, beauty from nature, and memories, are a gift to us; because we are loved.”

The service was very beautiful but afterwards an ex-policeman got up on a chair and started shouting about needing to punish the criminals and bring back the death penalty. He had missed the angels and was locked in anger and his own cause.

It is easy to hear the demons. They sometimes speak with the loudest voice. During the week my own demons were out in force. “Too much work, you will never get it done in time for Christmas,” they said; too many demands and not enough answers. On the phone I speak to one of our congregation who has been in hospital for an operation. She is home now but there has been no nurse to change her bandage for three days, her leg has swollen and she has blisters, but seems too

gentle to complain. “We are praying for you,” I tell her, but wish I could visit and that a prayer would heal her pain. Ralph, our verger, is becoming increasingly unsteady on his feet. A month ago he used a walking stick for the first time, now he needs a frame to walk and can no longer hold a pen in his hands – right at the moment when with all the extra services we need him most. We love this man; he is a treasure of St Martin’s, again and again going the extra mile. It seems so unfair that he is unable to do the job he has dedicated his life to doing.

On the news the demons are out in force. The economic community, such as it was, is in a state of meltdown. In the House of Commons, the argument taking place sounds more like public schoolboys bullying each other, scoring points by the sharpness of their tongues. There seems nothing to respect here, no angels. In the House of Lords they are discussing Civil Partnerships and it still comes across as if for the Church, two people loving each other is the biggest problem in the world.

And then my mother phones to say she is ill and can’t get out of bed and hasn’t been able to do her shopping or post her Christmas cards or take the dog for a walk. And I on the other end of the phone am feeling guilty; what kind of priest am I who can’t even help his own mother?

Heaven in ordinary, where? Wouldn’t it be good, you sometimes think, if God did just work the miracles; that you could just pray, and he would do something? Isn’t that what faith is for? To somehow encourage some kind of divine intervention that will sort the problem, work the miracle, throw the lifeline? So where are these angels? Well, you may think this sermon so far is a bit like Job – a list of moans. But that is because you have been hearing about the doubts and demons that eat away at your Spirit. You think this is a moan because I haven’t yet told you about the angels that also populated my week, or at least popped in to visit!

On Monday, there was the Service for the Missing, people who have gone missing from their loved ones and never returned. You’d think it would be the saddest service in the world, and on one level it was, but it was also so full of love; love so great you could feel the ocean of its depth and in the dedication and devotion among those who packed the church and prepared the service with such love and with Katherine’s care and compassion. Love, in the darkness, and beyond it.

This week down in the Vestry Hall, a small group of volunteers are opening letters from all around the country for the Christmas Appeal, counting the cheques, meticulously recording donations and sending replies, organising everything in shoe boxes. Here the angels are in evidence, both in the dedication of these volunteers and in the hundreds of people all over the country who have responded to this appeal with such care about homeless people and those in need. One letter reads “Please accept this donation of £300 from my husband and I. We are pensioners and are not well off and would love to be able to help more, but we have decided to send our winter heating allowance, because people who are homeless must be much colder than us.” The generosity is deeply moving. The letters are coming in by the sack. Nearly one million pounds, and it’s not even Christmas. We need these angels to keep giving more than ever because in this economic recession while the Christmas bonuses and office parties may continue, it is the poorest and most vulnerable who suffer.

In the Dick Sheppard Chapel, a new tapestry by Gerhard Richter has been lent to us by a generous donor. Here for me this last week were the angels. It has filled this small chapel with light and energy, warmth and imagination. It is like hanging resurrection on the wall. I sit and gaze at the colours – the cross that leads you through layers into the beyond. There are angels here too. Up in the church on Thursday, it is packed for the school carol service and the young pupils are reading from the King James Bible with such clarity and beauty, so that the story of the incarnation sings. In the evening the Archers gather for a Christmas Dinner with such joy and obvious affection. Everyone looks a bit foolish in their party paper hats and the carols sound a bit out of tune but they

are definitely sung by angels, or the angel parts of all of us, and when one of the group is taken ill the rest respond like the angels with such grace and care. On the way home I realise I have lost my new mobile phone. But when we call my own number a woman replies that she has found it in a puddle on Jubilee Bridge and will return it first thing the following morning – definitely another angel. And then on my day off I go down and visit my mother and do her shopping and take her dog out for a walk and by the time I leave, my Mum says she's feeling better and on the way back on the train I have to admit that I am feeling a bit more like an angel.

So what's this got to do with our Gospel? Everything. The angel comes to Mary and says "*God is with you*. You maybe a teenager in a village nobody has heard of, on the edge of the Roman Empire in an occupied country, without any education, or seeming power, or any wealth or security, but you are going to share in the life of God. You, yourself is to be the one who is the bearer of the Christ child." Now there would be many demons expressing fairly strong objections to that demand: "You're unmarried, you're immoral, a lost cause. This promise is not a blessing, it's a curse."

But Mary chooses to accept the angels. The word is made flesh among us; down here in our own very real and messy lives, lives which don't know all the answers. Lives which sometimes get caught up in doubt, and are misled by the demons, but lives which can also be the bearers of God's hope and love and salvation. If you open your eyes, the angels are in fact all around you. They might be a bit hidden at times, or weighed down by all the food or lost in the wrapping paper, but they are there if you have the eyes to see. And the angels may also be in you. I'm sure most of us think that's pretty impossible but isn't that too the promise of our Gospel, that heaven can be in the most ordinary, the most extraordinary you? Monks have a religious practice called examine. At the end of the end of the day they are invited to examine the way the day has passed: the events, the meetings, the words, the actions. And in all of this they are invited to try and recognise angels of God, and also the moments when they turned away. As I end this address I would like you just for a moment to reflect upon the angels that in the last day have entered your life...

Ralph phoned last night. He is in hospital having tests. He sounded so cheerful on the phone. "Can you thank everyone for their prayers?" he said. Another angel, one with a beard.

Christ is born in a manger down here in our real lives. May each one of us be made worthy of the promises of Christ and be bearers of his love to all people.