

ANGELS AND DEVILS

St Michael and All Angels

Sunday Sept 28th 2014

St Michael's, Cornhill

Just inside the Emirates Stadium at Highbury is a fine bust of Herbert Chapman, the manager who put Arsenal on the map in the 1930s. As an Arsenal man I am very chuffed that Epstein was persuaded to make the bust of Chapman. But then, just inside a very different building, Harewood House in Yorkshire, there's another very different Epstein. This time it's an amazing image of Adam, the *primaeval* man, carved out of a huge solid cube of alabaster. When the Queen visited Harewood, after it had been installed, she was carefully guided round the rear of the sculpture for fear she saw Adam's private parts. It's always tickled me as a report of the event. It assumes a very naïve Elizabeth II – and that she certainly is not.

But it is a third Epstein sculpture, again right by the entrance to a great building upon which I really want to focus. It is his splendid depiction of St Michael and the Devil, on the south wall of Coventry Cathedral. It is a most dramatic representation of the devil being slain and it is very powerful in its symbolism. In a way it helps redeem Michael, who in our contemporary world often gets a bad press. He is seen as the epitome of outdated myths, fit only for Grimm's Fairy Tales or something similar.

Of course, it's easy to see how this comes about, since Michael is not, like most of the saints we honour, a historical figure. He is instead a purely symbolic figure, captured most dramatically in that second reading from the Apocalypse (the Revelation to St John the Divine). That reading is a highly coloured piece – even melodramatic:

'Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels *fighting* against the dragon', then moments later '...and the great dragon was *thrown down* ... and his angels were thrown down with him.' Now unhistorical as this picture is, it was certainly *provoked* by a historical incident or set of experiences. Apocalyptic writing is always para-historical, that is, provoked by terrifying and woeful events. So, in the Old Testament, if you decode the book of Daniel, you uncover an almost precise detailing of the events when Israel was oppressed by the Syro-Grecian tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes. An accurate account of history is there.

It is only at the end, as Daniel imagines the future, that the description enters the world of myth and offers a dramatic description of what might happen. So it is here in the Revelation to John. It was probably the oppression of Rome that provoked much of the imagery in the Apocalypse of John. Both Jesus and the embryonic Jewish Christian community were under the heavy arm of Roman hegemony. The rebellion in Jerusalem in AD 70, by the Jews, probably meant that the local Roman governors had become still more repressive. Jews and Christians were all terrified for their lives.

Throughout John's apocalypse there are telling images: the four horsemen bringing woe and destruction; the 'Scarlet Lady'; the number of the beast – six hundred and sixty six. As with Daniel, much of this writing would have been there to support the tiny Christian community as it struggled to survive in turbulent and violent times. So, in the Apocalypse, Michael becomes the symbol of God's victory, in Jesus Christ, over all the powers of evil. Christ as the victor against evil is a common image in the New Testament – in Paul, in the Gospels and elsewhere.

For some, this rather melodramatic picture of the fight against evil, using images of good and bad angels, with Michael and the devil portrayed as both a human being and elsewhere as a dragon – for some, these images seem to come from another world, another era, another mythical universe. Yet, in many ways, the drama, the colour and the power of such images never dies. Some forty years ago, John Austin Baker, later Bishop of Salisbury wrote a remarkable book which he called simply *The Foolishness of God*, using a telling phrase from Paul's correspondence with the early Corinthian Christians.

Baker's book is a classic of its sort. It is a relatively concise, highly readable and compelling account of the Christian faith. One of the chapters which is most challenging is that dealing with the moral life. Baker notes that much of the time our ethical decisions are simply part of the daily round. Even social ethics can be approached with a coolness when things are running normally. However, there are moments when we are faced with ultimate evil, an evil so terrible that it cannot be ignored. Such evil challenges our normal perception and reactions.

In Baker's book it is Nazism and the Holocaust that takes centre stage. But it could be the 14 million Kulaks left to die by Stalin; it could be the 1916 Armenian genocide; it could be Mao's 'cultural revolution'; it could be the Tutsi's and the Hutu's in Rwanda – or the 3,000 who died in 9/11. Such terrible evil must always be taken very seriously and Michael symbolically and powerfully reminds us of that. But Michael also reminds us of the final triumph of love in God's work in Jesus Christ. Jesus too faces ultimate evil but ultimately it is goodness which is the vanquisher, the victor. The good angels of Jacob's ladder in our first reading, who are captured again in our gospel, speak of the reign of God.

Michael is not an outdated mythical figure. Epstein's dramatic sculpture captures it perfectly and hopefully soon in this church we shall have an icon which depicts that same drama. Michael is the symbol of God's overwhelming defeat of evil in Jesus Christ. That really is Good News.

Amen

Readings:

Genesis. 28. 10-17.

Revelation. 12. 7-12.

John. 1. 47-end.

Revelation. 12. 7-12.

7 And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels,

8 And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven.

9 And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

10 And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.

11 And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.

12 Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.

John. 1. 47-end.

47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!

48 Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.

49 Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel.

50 Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these.

51 And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.