

St Michael's Cornhill
Patronal Festival 29 September 2015
Preacher: The Revd Aidan Platten

Those of you who are regular worshippers here will be accustomed to the use of fine poetry within sermons - expanding horizons drawing links between different worlds. So I draw on two well known Scandinavian poets - Swedish to be precise - Benny Andersen and Bjorn Ulvaeus.

In 1979 that poetic duo - the co-writers and instrumentalists of the Swedish pop group Abba - wrote one of their big hits 'I have a dream'. And with their then wives they sang:

I believe in angels
Something good in everything I see
I believe in angels
When I know the time is right for me
I'll cross the stream - I have a dream

A cynic may put the whole song down to a collection of rhyming English clichés thrown together by a couple of Swedish composers and set to a catchy tune. Now, I don't stand here to defend the subtlety or intellect of the poetry, there is much to criticise. But, in singing about dreams Abba beckoned us to think about how dreams might tie together two worlds: the world of the now - the physical, the temporal - the world of our time; this world that means you and I can see and touch one another. 'Something good in everything I see'. They sang too about the supernatural - a sort of world outside the tangible; about the bit of us that really makes us the people we are. We might want to think of it as the world with which our soul relates. We talk even, of soul-mates, of being hurt to the soul, to the core. We know that there is something that influences beyond the physical. It is the bit of us that loves rather than lusts. Sometimes it's a world where we can dream; and just occasionally our wildest dreams might become real.

In simplest terms, we might understand Abba's crossing of the stream as the movement from earth to heaven at death. That, though, gives us a very two dimensional and compartmentalised view of life: we begin in this box, and we move to another one. If that is the case then perhaps we should pack up and go to the pub now. There is little need to be here if we just move from crib to coffin and that's it. What is life if it isn't dynamic. Abba's simple and naive song actually speaks, or sings, of a much more fluid world; a world where our place as people exists even after mistakes, of a world where good - which we might want to call love, or even God - prevails. Even in the dark there is light and hope. Beyond us there is some kind of being and there are angels who continually move between our worlds; these ethereal messengers who work in and through so many things that surround us.

But what do people really think about angels?

Jacob, we are told, saw angels going up and down a ladder between heaven and earth; and when did he see them? In his dream.

‘Jacob put a stone under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to the heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending upon it.’

Think of the angels, if you like, as the first glimpse of a cyber world - taking messages to and from heaven - inhabiting both heaven and earth and some kind of world in between. God came with the angels to speak with Jacob. Jacob’s response is a wonderful realisation - wonderful because it is full of the humility that we rarely dare admit to.

‘Surely the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it!’ said Jacob. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’

It is that revelation to Jacob that we are to tap into tonight. As we gather here, we celebrate the Patronal Festival of this lovely church and dedicate this new icon. This place - God’s house - like any of our homes has changed over time. A church that doesn’t change cannot articulate afresh the love that God desires us to enjoy with him. For we must continually ensure that our buildings signpost people to God. This church whilst being God’s house must feel to be God’s home - a place where God invites us to receive his hospitality.

Quite new in this place, you will see the sanctuary lamp up at the High Altar that reminds us of the presence of Christ in the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist; and the now this new icon pointing us heavenward. Some may ask ‘why bother with such improvements?’ The answer is quite simple. We bother because this place isn’t just ours. It belongs to all those who rush in and out during the week offering prayers of thanksgiving or desperation; it belongs to those who come to be transported by music at the hands and feet of an organist - it belongs to them even if they don’t pay for it as one might like!

In spite of being part of an Archdeaconry and a Diocese and all that organisational stuff, none of that is about true ownership. This place ultimately belongs to God; those entrusted with responsibility here and in other churches, lay or ordained, are stewards of God’s mysteries; and it is those mysteries that this place calls believers and searchers alike to discover. So why adorn it with more beautiful things? Well, for one simple reason really if we simmer it all down. Because our vocation as individuals is to meet with God - as Jacob did - and more than that, to enable others to meet with God – as Jesus did in his calling of Nicodemus.

Buildings like this are adorned for the beauty of God that those who enter these places know themselves to be entering the courts of the Lord. Our response on entering should be like Jacob’s; and our prayer for worshippers and sceptical visitors should be the same; that all who visit this place may remark:

‘Surely the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it!’ ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’