

Sermon – Consecration of James Grier as Bishop of Plymouth – 29.9.22

St Michael and All Angels

It is a great delight for us all to be here today at the beginning of this new ministry both for James and for Liz, for Josh and Toby, and also for the diocese of Exeter and the city of Plymouth. Having been brought up in Bristol, served my curacy in Exeter, and having known the delights of Dartmoor, days off in Dawlish and Plymouth, ice cream and candy floss in Torquay and Teignmouth, I must confess I sense a tiny pang of envy in my heart as you look forward to years of ministry in the glorious south west. Most of us go there on holiday – you get to live there!

Today is the feast of St Michael and all Angels. If you ever thought the Bible dull, then today's readings might make you change your mind. They are readings that make us realise that there is more going on around us that we usually imagine, or as Hamlet said in Shakespeare's play "*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*"

Our Old Testament reading, echoed in the gospel, has Jacob at a crisis moment in his life. Sleeping out in the cold desert, he has this weird dream of a ladder between earth and heaven, with angels climbing up and down it, like a bunch of removal men bringing things up and down from the attic.

Then there is that reading from the Book of Revelation that describes warfare in heaven, with the Archangel Michael and his army of angels fighting tooth and nail against a dragon with seven heads, ten horns & all his demonic forces. It is a scene that seems like it belongs more in the Lord of the Rings, or Game of Thrones rather than in church.

These visions may seem a long way from the consecration of a Bishop, but the one thing that holds all this together is the focus today on the ministry of angels.

I suspect many of us don't think about angels a great deal, even in church. Which is strange because apparently about 1/3 of people in the UK believe in angels and in the USA that figure rises to around 70%.

Angels are those mysterious beings created by God to be his messengers. They are, if you like, God's postmen or women. The word *ANGELOS* in Greek can mean a human messenger or it can mean an angelic being, but it's closely connected to the word *ANGELIA* or 'message' or the verb *ANGGELLO* - to announce something.

But when we look a bit more closely at angels, rarely do they appear like those blond figures in white nightdresses, sprouting wings out of their shoulder blades that we usually imagine. In fact, most of the time they seem extraordinarily ordinary.

There is the story of Justin Martyr, one of the great early Christian theologians who as a young man was pondering life and truth and purpose. He was walking on a beach in Ephesus when a mysterious old man came alongside him and engaged him in a long conversation about Greek philosophy, uncovering the failure of the philosophers to offer a satisfying way of living and dying and pointing him towards the Bible as offering a much better way. And then the man disappears never to be seen again.

I think of a friend of mine who was in the army. On a climbing exercise one day, after one of his colleagues had fallen to his death, he found himself paralysed with fear on a rock face. Suddenly, out of nowhere, on a remote rock face with no-one visible for miles around, a mysterious climber appears out of nowhere, steps onto the ledge he was on, puts a rope into his harness and lowers him to safety before vanishing on up the mountain.

I think of another friend who was visiting Jerusalem wondering about the direction of his life and anxious for a friend who was seriously ill. He visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the place of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and was staring at markings made in the wall by medieval pilgrims, when suddenly he feels a tap on his shoulder and someone dressed as a Greek Orthodox priest speaks to him in perfect English, reassures him that his friend will be OK, tells him that God understands him and has a plan for him, before disappearing into the crowds.

So, James, if this is the kind of thing angels do, what does this tell us, as you begin your ministry as Bishop of Plymouth?

Were these human or heavenly beings? Who knows? But maybe it doesn't matter that much.

The point is that in each of these cases these mysterious encounters set them off on a journey which led to them finding faith in Jesus Christ.

The word evangelism has its heart that same word – and as the Archbishop of York likes to point out, the word evangelist has the word 'angel' at its heart. Evangelism strictly means *eu-angelos* – not just a messenger of news, but a messenger of GOOD news. And so perhaps today, James, these readings point to God's call to you to be a messenger, someone who deals not just in news, but in good news.

It is that ministry that will soon be described in the liturgy as *“speaking in the name of God and expounding the gospel of salvation... following the example of the prophets and the teaching of the apostles, you are to proclaim the gospel boldly, confront injustice and work for righteousness and peace in all the world.”*

You are to be a messenger, an angel, if you like, to the people of Plymouth – to anyone who will listen, in every confirmation, school visit, meeting with local councillors, every chance encounter.

And to do this work, you will need a worldview that is big enough to include angels. 30% of people may believe in angels but that means 70% don't. There are many people who have no truck at all with a world beyond what we can see, feel and touch. There are many who subscribe to a purely materialist view of the world which has no scope for anything beyond what can be scientifically analysed or verified in a test tube.

Now, of course, Christians believe firmly that we live in a world of order which can be analysed and to a certain extent predicted through scientific research. In fact, if this is not a reasonably predictable world with a divinely given sense of order and structure then science would make little sense.

Yet that is not everything. In a few moments we will say the Nicene Creed together. It starts by declaring that we believe - not in ourselves, nor in the

market or the state - but in *“God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, of all that is seen **and** unseen.”*

The Creed opens up for us a much bigger world than a purely materialistic one can offer. It's a world that has space for all that we can see and touch and measure but also, all kinds of things that we cannot see but are equally real, such as love, compassion, holiness, miracles, and - yes – angels. The world opened up for us in the Creeds and in the Bible is just too big to fit into purely secular modes of thinking.

James - your task as an angelic messenger to the people of Plymouth is to open eyes of everyone who will listen to you, to the unseen world which alone makes sense of the seen world. A rather dull, sensible, purely rationalistic form of Christian faith, a vaguely religious version of what everyone tends to believe anyway - that doesn't really help us much. Don't let yourself be confined by the limited perspective that most people assume but instead keep your eyes open every day to that extra dimension of reality that we see opened for us in the pages of the Bible, a world where kings confess their sins, where widows and the poor find justice, where from time to time miraculous healing takes place, and where God remarkably and inexplicably intervenes to transform human lives.

Lastly, the ministry of angels reminds us of both the stark reality and yet the ultimate powerlessness of evil. The reading from the Book of Revelation describes this dramatic warfare in the heavenly realms between Michael and his angels and the dragon and the demonic forces. Whatever we make of such a story, it points to a conflict with which we are deeply familiar in our world.

When we see the destructiveness of what is happening in Ukraine, routine violence against women across the world, children's lives blighted by abuse by adults, we are only too aware of the reality of evil within our world – and, yes, we have to admit also, it finds its way into the Church as well. Two weeks ago, I was at the opening of a new Centre for Education and Wellbeing at a school in the shadow of Grenfell Tower. It was named after Isaac Paulos, a little boy of five years old who got lost in his family's frantic attempt to escape through

smoke-filled staircase and tragically died in the fire at Grenfell. That day would have been his 11th birthday and it was heart-breaking to feel the pain of his parents, as they mourned the loss of their precious little boy, imagining what might have been if his life had not been cut short.

James - you will come across a great deal that is broken and yes, perhaps even what is evil, in Plymouth as you would anywhere else. And in a sense, it is your calling to go to those places of pain, not to avoid them. Yet you go there fully aware of the reality of sin and death and evil and yet also conscious that their power is broken.

Our reading depicts the battle between Good and Evil, the forces of Michael and those of the Dragon, yet it doesn't imagine that conflict going on forever. We are told *"The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."*

You go into each situation of pain and trauma, aware that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. He has conquered the powers of sin and death and hell. You go both with realism and recognition of the depths of the pain and suffering you will encounter, and yet also with confidence that love, joy, peace win in the end because Jesus Christ wins in the end. And that is the good news you proclaim.

James, today as you are consecrated and become the Bishop of Plymouth, we urge you to expand your heart, your mind, your vision. Don't settle for a narrow, constricted predictable view of the world that has no space for the miraculous, the remarkable, the dramatic intervention of God. And we urge you too, to go into every situation not denying the reality of pain, poverty and grief and yet full of joy, confident in the victory that Jesus Christ has won, determined to share that good news with everyone you meet.

AMEN