

## Michaelmas 2019 Evensong – Stewardship

In the late 1990s a publishing company instituted a project through which they commissioned different nationally known authors to write introductions to various books from the King James Bible. Will Self was entrusted with the Revelation to St John the Divine – a singular choice! Self is a brilliant writer, but with quite a past. He was most famously caught injecting himself with heroin when a member of the press corps on a flight with John Major. Now a reformed character, he is still colourful. Self's Introduction certainly made headlines, because it too – like Revelation in some ways- became a divisive text. He wrote it in memory of a brilliant but disturbed university friend who died young and who became obsessed with the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation as his mind frayed. Self wrote: 'If Revelation conjures up one single feeling in me, it is one of superstitious awe. To think this ancient text has survived to become the stuff of modern, psychotic nightmare.' To him it was incomprehensible, 'a sick text.'

There is certainly truth in the fact that John's mystical mind-set offers the possibility of offering fuel to an over-active imagination, yet this can be equally true of any such vivid writing. We certainly understand a great deal more about Revelation through the work of Biblical Criticism over the past century or more, but I'm not going to do much more than comment that as a text, it has value to us in conjuring up in the mind's-eye flashes of every facet of our humanity, particularly in terms of light and darkness. The ecstatic vision we heard of in our second reading takes us to a wondrous imagining of the heavenly host worshipping the lamb, to whom the wonderful song of praise is sung, *'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!'*

Did you note the extraordinary description of the lamb? *'Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.'* In the church of St Barnabas, Hove, there is a window by the Victorian firm of Clayton and Bell (who also made the four eastern nave windows here) which depicts the lamb – complete with seven horns and eyes! It is slightly odd to behold!

I was thinking during the week about the church in Little Petherick in Cornwall. It's a beautiful little building most wonderfully restored and refitted in the early years of the twentieth century by Athelstan Riley, one of the great promoters of the Tractarian revival. It has a charming rood screen, coloured and gilded in medieval fashion, complete with the figures of the crucified Lord, with Mary and John. Ninian Comper, the designer, also fixed two large seraphim on either side, complete with six wings. What struck me as a teenager when I first saw the church were the figures on the front of the rood loft in the side aisle. Imagine two overlapping carved and gilded flaming wheels, each with angelic faces and wings at their centres, together with wings around the wheels. What makes it even more extraordinary are the eyes (and I seem to remember that they were actual glass eyes) fixed all the way around the rims. These are none other than the Ophanim – the cherubic wheels mentioned both in Ezekiel and the Book of Daniel.

The Bible is full of such imagery. Is it of purpose to us? Absolutely. Whilst I'm not sure about the ability of capturing such things within artistic endeavours, we are led on a journey every time we read about such things in our Scriptures. Usually, it is best to be led on that journey, and then to say, 'How does this text speak to me? What helps me to understand the Love God bears for me, for humanity and the whole of creation within this writing?' Sometimes this won't be readily apparent. Sometimes some elucidation will come later, but there is always value in what we read – even in the most difficult passages from the Bible.

Today we celebrate the ancient Feast of Michaelmas – St Michael and All Angels. As I said this morning, I feel an affinity to this Festival, it's the name! I was profoundly moved this morning when several people shared their own 'angel' stories with me after the service. We tend in this age of doubt and profound scepticism to grind away at the possibilities of the encounters we have behind which lies the Divine Light. This could be as much within our human interaction or sometimes in an encounter which seems beyond our understanding. Our passage through life is always accompanied by this Divine Light, but it can, however, only shine if we allow it.

St Francis of Assisi wrote that, *'The visible world is an active doorway to the invisible world, and the invisible world is much larger than the visible.'* Is this airy-fairyness? I don't think so. The Franciscan writer Richard Rohr writes: Our outer world and its **inner** significance must come together for there to be any wholeness - and holiness. The result is deep joy and a resounding sense of coherent beauty. What was personified in the body of Jesus was a manifestation of this one universal truth: Matter is, and has always been, the hiding place for Spirit, forever offering itself to be discovered anew.

We have been thinking today about Stewardship, and I hope that you won't mind if I share some thoughts from this morning. For a thousand years this building has stood as a reminder to the community that in Jesus, the Light and Love of God accompanies us every step of our journey - revealed through selfless love. The world has never needed this knowledge as much as now. This morning I asked people to consider doing two things for our church as we seek to serve God.

Firstly, please pray. **Pray** for our own community here at Holy Trinity. **Pray** that we might always be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit on our mission to serve Jesus joyfully in all that we do. **Pray** that we may reveal to the wider community the grace open to all through Faith. **Pray** too for the world. It needs it!

Secondly, **give**. **Give** of yourself, **Give** of your time and talents. Your church needs you! If you give financially, please consider the amount you give. If you give as much as you feel able to, thank you! We are so grateful for your sacrifice. If you can give more, that would be such a blessing to us. If you don't give regularly through the Parish Giving Scheme, please consider doing so. You will find details of our running costs in the Stewardship Leaflet. It costs £570 per day, (£24 per hour) to keep our mission on the road. We are greatly blessed that we undertake as much as we do through your generosity. Only minor amounts of giving are used on the building, and we have no major reserves. Please be assured that the roof appeal is separate from every day running costs.

I have spoken quite a lot this evening about imagery, particularly as we rejoice today in the angels depicted within our Faith. Let us rejoice with them in worship. And (as I said this morning) if you don't believe in them, then know that for Jesus' sake you are called to be one! In the names of the Archangels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel, in your prayer and giving be a healer, a proclaimer, a warrior against hunger, hopelessness and evil. Be a light bearer to the darkness within many areas of society. Do that for Love's sake and you will be a messenger of God, a bearer of good tidings, a protector and lover of God and of God's people; a sign of the Love revealed in its fulness through the one who draws heaven to earth, and earth to heaven – Jesus Christ, our Lord.



Adoration of the Mystic Lamb – Jan Van Eyck c.1432 Ghent Cathedral

#### **Daniel 10: 4-end**

<sup>5</sup>I looked up and saw a man clothed in linen, with a belt of gold from Uphaz around his waist. <sup>6</sup>His body was like beryl, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude. <sup>7</sup>I, Daniel, alone saw the vision;

the people who were with me did not see the vision, though a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled and hid themselves. <sup>8</sup> So I was left alone to see this great vision. My strength left me, and my complexion grew deathly pale, and I retained no strength. <sup>9</sup> Then I heard the sound of his words; and when I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a trance, face to the ground.

<sup>10</sup> But then a hand touched me and roused me to my hands and knees. <sup>11</sup> He said to me, 'Daniel, greatly beloved, pay attention to the words that I am going to speak to you. Stand on your feet, for I have now been sent to you.' So while he was speaking this word to me, I stood up trembling. <sup>12</sup> He said to me, 'Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. <sup>13</sup> But the prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me for twenty-one days. So Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, and I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>14</sup> and have come to help you understand what is to happen to your people at the end of days. For there is a further vision for those days.'

<sup>15</sup> While he was speaking these words to me, I turned my face towards the ground and was speechless.

<sup>16</sup> Then one in human form touched my lips, and I opened my mouth to speak, and said to the one who stood before me, 'My lord, because of the vision such pains have come upon me that I retain no strength.

<sup>17</sup> How can my lord's servant talk with my lord? For I am shaking,<sup>[b]</sup> no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me.'

<sup>18</sup> Again one in human form touched me and strengthened me. <sup>19</sup> He said, 'Do not fear, greatly beloved, you are safe. Be strong and courageous!' When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, 'Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me.' <sup>20</sup> Then he said, 'Do you know why I have come to you? Now I must return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I am through with him, the prince of Greece will come. <sup>21</sup> But I am to tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth. There is no one with me who contends against these princes except Michael, your prince.

## Revelation 5

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed<sup>[a]</sup> with seven seals; <sup>2</sup> and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' <sup>3</sup> And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. <sup>4</sup> And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. <sup>5</sup> Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'

<sup>6</sup> Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. <sup>7</sup> He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne.

<sup>8</sup> When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. <sup>9</sup> They sing a new song:

'You are worthy to take the scroll

and to open its seals,

for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God

saints from<sup>[b]</sup> every tribe and language and people and nation;

<sup>10</sup> you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving<sup>[c]</sup> our God,

and they will reign on earth.'

<sup>11</sup> Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, <sup>12</sup> singing with full voice,

'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered

to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might

and honour and glory and blessing!'

<sup>13</sup> Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb

be blessing and honour and glory and might

for ever and ever!'

<sup>14</sup> And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshipped.