

Isaiah 44:24-45:8, Revelation 12:1-12 - Dragons and Angels

See <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=372643477> for the text of the readings

55,555. I was driving a friend of mine somewhere recently, giving her a lift. I happened to notice that the mileometer in my car's instrument panel read 55 thousand, five hundred and fifty three miles. I pointed it out. I said, 'In a couple of miles the mileometer will be all '5's'. 55,555 miles.

She was very excited. She said, 'That's wonderful. You must make a wish - and your angel will hear it!' She was serious! She really believed that strange bits of numerology could put you in touch with a guardian angel.

Just in case you were wondering, this was really recent: 2017, not some time travel back to mediaeval times. Actually, I don't think that the carriages they travelled in then had instruments to count the number of miles - or chains, or days' marches, or whatever - they had covered, like my car.

So why would a sophisticated Cobham resident, who certainly in all other respects showed every sign of being compos mentis, suddenly appear to be intimate with angels? Indeed, why would anyone be intimate with angels? What are angels? What's rather striking here is that my friend was really using a similar sort of vocabulary to the words used by the author of the Book of Revelation.

*And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels,
And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven.
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.*

It's a picture of heaven. Angels, which in Greek are messengers, actually belong to both sides. We tend to think of them, as my passenger did - or does - as always benign, 'guardian angels' for instance. But here the Devil, the dragon, has his angel host as well. Just like that old T-shirt which said, 'My lawyer can beat your lawyer', God's angels, led by the angel Michael, could beat Satan's angels. And they did.

I think that quite a lot of people, even nowadays, believe in angels. And they also believe in the Devil. Of course in the Bible, the Devil isn't just to be found in the Book of Revelation. Jesus was tempted by the Devil in the wilderness

at the beginning of his ministry, after he had been baptised by John the Baptist. And he 'cast out devils' from people as well.

I think that there are some serious logical, theological difficulties with the concept of the Devil, if it's intended that we should think of him literally, perhaps as the personification of evil, the opposite of good.

One difficulty, for example, is that if God made everything - as in our lesson from Isaiah, 'I am the Lord that maketh all things' - then God made evil as well as good. Actually, Isaiah can contemplate that possibility. At the end of our reading, he says, 'I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.'

I suppose that there is a possible way of understanding the Devil without having to imagine an actual figure - if one understands the picture in Revelation to be just that, an image. That is, he is the absence of good, the absence of worth. Just as one can't understand what it is for something to be black unless you've seen some white things to compare with, so perhaps what the Bible calls the 'Devil' or the dragon, or 'the old serpent', is really just a picturesque way of talking about the opposite of virtue, of neighbourly love. You can't judge what is good and civilised until you've seen what the opposite looks like.

Revelation is a picture of heaven, what heaven might look like; what God is. The lesson from Isaiah is an oracle, God speaking through a prophet, saying what God does. God is the creator: but in this era, in Isaiah's prophecy, God is portrayed as getting involved in actually micro-managing His creation - '... saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.'

Just as the lady in my car sounded a bit strange to me when she started talking about angels, so creation, as a concept, is challenging. We are passionate about our care for the environment, about our care for what we certainly do call 'God's creation', but we are rather agnostic about how the process works. Since Darwin, since we learned about evolution, most of us haven't seen God as creating in the hands-on way that Isaiah describes. If you do believe in the sort of God that Isaiah describes, you might be called a 'creationist'. You might believe that God literally created the world in six days. Some creationists even tie the date of this down, not to a cosmic Big Bang, but to the year 4,004BC.

Donald Trump, or at least his supporters, include creationists. They don't understand, or follow the implications, of Darwin's theory of evolution. Survival of the fittest, climate change - phooey, they tend to say.

But again, for most of us educated people, creationism flies against what we feel we now know, from scientific enquiry. We feel that it is possible to believe in God as ultimate creator, without having to contradict what we have learned through scientific enquiry. God did create us, but not in quite such a simple or direct way as, say, Isaiah describes here.

We're beginning to appreciate how much we don't know. How can we square the circle? These visions, of God through his own words, in the mouth of a prophet like Isaiah, and the fantastical pictures of life in heaven, in the book of Revelation, in some ways seem strange to us, because we feel that, to some extent, we now know more. We don't need prophets to understand creation - or rather, because we understand the process of evolution, many people even go as far as Prof Richard Dawkins in denying that God is involved in shaping our world at all - and they conclude that there isn't actually such a thing as God at all.

That rather chimes with my unease about angels. Surely it's just a fantastical myth, that picture of heaven, especially when you get to the battle between St Michael and the Devil, the dragon, the old serpent. Surely it harks back to the creation myth, to the story of Adam and Eve. It's the same old serpent which tempted Eve to eat the apple from the tree of life. Not literally true.

But equally, if we strip away all the things that we can replace by our modern scientific understanding, does that absolutely rule out heaven - or angels? As Bishop John Robinson, in his book 'Honest to God', argued, it can't literally be true that there is a place, a place called heaven, above the clouds. Not but what astronauts and early aviators have certainly thought that, as they climbed into the stratosphere, being up there, it brought God to mind. Do you know that wonderful poem 'High Flight', that they sometimes read at an airman's funeral?

"Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air....

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace.
Where never lark, or even eagle flew —
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,

– Put out my hand, and touched the face of God."

It's by a Spitfire pilot called John Gillespie Magee, and was written in 1941. What a picture! Not dragons and angels, but still, the realm of heaven.

You know that if we were in the southern Mediterranean, or in Africa, somehow in those places, to talk about angels and miracles would feel much more normal. People are more like the lady in my car. Perhaps it's only us rather prosaic Northern Europeans who can't see them, can't hear God's voice in the din of modern life, or see the messages brought by His messengers, His angels.

But if you use a poet's imagination, even we can get it. You remember what Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."

Actually there are quite a few blackberries nice and ripe by our St Mary's Hall. Of course we can pick them. But let's remember that 'every common bush' is indeed 'afire with God'. And let's be thankful, and treat God's creation with proper respect.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant