

St. Michael and All Angels Sunday 2012

– perception, spiritual warfare, the providence of God, perseverance and participation

Hebrews 12:22-24,28-29; Revelation 12:7-12; Ephesians 6:10-13; Mark 9:14-29

Today is St Michael and All Angels Sunday. As we celebrate the name day of our church I want to touch on four issues arising from our readings and which I believe are important if we are to move forward as a missional faith community:

- Perception and belief
- The reality of spiritual warfare and struggle
- The providence of God and perseverance
- Prayer in the Spirit – participating in the redemptive activity of God

Perception and Belief

For many of us, belief in angels and heavenly beings like St. Michael is a step too far. Rather than help our faith as it has for generations past, it is today an obstacle to belief in the claims of the Gospel.

Yet developments in astrophysics over the last eighty years point us in the opposite direction.

In contemporary science, “...“dark matter” is hypothesized to account for a large part of the total mass in the universe. [What makes this interesting is that] dark matter cannot be seen directly with telescopes; evidently it neither emits nor absorbs light or other electromagnetic radiation at any significant level. Instead, its existence and properties are inferred from its gravitational effects on visible (so called, “shiny”) matter, radiation, and the large scale structure of the universe.¹

¹ Dark matter came to the attention of astrophysicists from the 1930's due to discrepancies observed between the mass of large astronomical objects (determined from their gravitational effects), and the mass calculated from the “luminous matter” they contain – such as stars, gas and dust.

Incredibly, dark matter is estimated to constitute 84% of the matter in the universe and 23% of the mass-energy.

Although the existence of dark matter is generally accepted by the mainstream scientific community, [especially since it is integral to the widely held “big bang” theory of the origin of the universe], several alternative theories have been proposed to try to explain the anomalies for which dark matter is intended to account.

Just the same, [the consensus belief] among cosmologists, is that dark matter is composed primarily of a new, not yet characterized, type of subatomic particle and the search for this particle is one of the major efforts in particle physics today.”²

All this may seem counter intuitive for those of us who still live in Newton’s universe, where “reality” is that which we can touch and feel – albeit (as Kant pointed out),³ within the relatively narrow bandwidth of human perception. Such hypotheses may seem both to us both credible, yet strangely beyond “common-sense”.

But, as Copernicus would remind us, common-sense is no guide to reality: our senses are deceptive, despite appearances the earth truly is round and truly does orbit the sun – not the other way round. It is a sad commentary on prejudice and bigotry within the Christian tradition that Copernicus was persecuted as a heretic for starting with what the scriptures tell us – that there is an unseen reality as well as a seen one within a unified creation, and that there is more in heaven and earth than we can know or imagine.⁴

Yet, regardless of what physicists may or may not authorise as what we are “allowed” to believe (what is plausible “reality” and what is not),⁵ the

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_matter

³ Dr Christopher Insole, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, *Immanuel Kant*, in *The Video Timeline Project – Faith and Modernity*, ed., Tim Hull and Paul Millband, St John’s College Nottingham, 2012 <http://www.stjohns-nottm.ac.uk/interactive-timeline-modern/>

⁴ Psalm 8:3-4.

⁵ See Wayne Lusvadi’s summary of Peter Burger, *A Rumor of Angels*, Allen Lane, 1970: http://www.amazon.com/Rumor-Angels-Society-Rediscovery-Supernatural/dp/0385066309/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1285421980&sr=1-1

first assertion of all our scripture readings today, indeed the fundamental assertion of scripture in its witness to the resurrection of our Lord, is this:

We live in a mysterious reality where the “unseen” is just as *real* as the “seen”, and part of this one reality created by God. The highly metaphoric imagery of dragons, demons, heavenly creatures, “principalities and powers”, may be archaic and even bizarre to our hearing, but that to which it points is as real as “real”, just the same.

Moreover, this unseen “spiritual” world is connected in a continuum with what is going on in the world we see. Again, as Kant might argue,⁶ this unseen world “bumps into” or is in “friction” with the world we moderns commonly regard as “reality”, even while it operates in a different order of reality. Or, as our Lord taught,⁷ what is bound on earth is bound in heaven, not after the fact but as part of it. I want to come back to this later as we consider our participation in the work of God within the creation.

The reality of spiritual warfare and struggle

Just a few weeks ago, Mark Edgecombe very eloquently unpacked the last section of Ephesians 6, a portion of which we heard again today. Mark made three points. In brief they were:

- *Being in Christ involves struggle against evil.*
- *Being in Christ means knowing who our enemy is.* “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood”, says Paul, “but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”
- We equip ourselves for this “warfare” by laying claim to all that is ours in Christ – *by living out of who we really are in Christ.*

⁶ Insole, *Immanuel Kant*.

⁷ Matthew 18:18-20.

If you missed Mark's sermon, or even if you heard it, I urge you to revisit it on our parish web site (it's one of the best sermons I, for one, have heard).⁸ I don't want to go over what he said again except to say this: the Christian life is inherently conflictual. Our struggle, this "warfare" against evil, against "principalities and powers", means the Christian life is *difficult*. It involves *suffering*. Or in the words of missiologist David Bosch, the call to become followers of Jesus is not an invitation to a "divine beauty contest".⁹

How often do we hear, "I don't feel comfortable" about this or that. This may be a valid response to certain situations but it is nowhere in view in the call to discipleship issued by the one who said, "foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no-where to rest his head";¹⁰ and who having said this, "steadfastly set his face to Jerusalem" where he would be "taken up".¹¹

In Colossians 2:15 Pauls writes:

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Yet, as Paul clearly asserts in our Ephesians passage, while the battle with "the powers" on the cross was *decisive*, it is not over. In our witness to the present and coming reign of God, we should expect opposition, and it won't be comfortable.

⁸ See *Let's look like what we really are* <http://stmichaels.org.nz/latest/sermons/>

⁹ David Bosch, *The Vulnerability of Mission*, reprinted in the Baptist Quarterly, http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bq/34-8_351.pdf P. 355: Satan's religious logic is not foreign to our own time, even to Christians. Only too often we find that Christianity is marketed in a 'things-go-better-with-Jesus' wrapping, that preachers tell us that it pays to be a Christian. I once found the following words on the dust cover of a book by the popular American preacher, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale: *Let Dr. Peale give you ten simple, workable goals for developing confidence; three proven secrets for keeping up your vigor; thirteen actual examples of how prayer power helped people in need; four words that lead to success; five actual techniques used by successful men to overcome defeat; an eight-point spiritual healing formula; a ten-point guide to popularity.*

¹⁰ Matthew 8:18-22.

¹¹ Luke 9:51.

The providence of God and perseverance

Just moving to our third observation though, we need to note a word of assurance and hope here, and it's this...

That whilst, as we live in these times waiting for our Lord, we experience life as difficult, conflictual and as one involving suffering, and so at times be tempted to despair, the affirmation of the Revelation of St. John (from which we heard today), is that from *God's perspective* the triumph in history of Christ and of his people, is assured.

As we live in these times “from the bottom up”, as it were, we will experience our lives as ambiguous and uncertain – just as Jesus did in that moment when he cried in all his humanity, “my God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?!”¹²

Yet when viewed from the “top down”, the affirmation of scripture is that, despite appearances, God is working his *good* purposes, that things *are* unfolding as they should, and that (as Amos prophesied), justice will indeed roll down like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.¹³

The call to God's people in the midst of this, echoed throughout John's Revelation (as throughout the whole bible), is to perseverance. Our call is to faithfulness.

But how does this happen?

Prayer in the Spirit – participating in the redemptive activity of God

The clue I think is in the tail end of the Gospel story of Jesus casting out a spirit from the epileptic boy. The deflated disciples, rather than celebrating the boy's return to health and “normality”, ask Jesus, “how come we couldn't do this?” Jesus replies, “this kind can come out only through prayer”.

¹² Mark 15:34.

¹³ Amos 5:24.

It's instructive that this episode occurs just after Jesus' mystical transfiguration "high on a mountain" where he went to pray.¹⁴ Again, the unseen is manifested as Jesus encounters his ancestors, the greatest prophets Moses and Elijah.

Significantly, Paul also finishes his teaching on 'spiritual warfare' by urging the Ephesians: "Pray in the *Spirit* at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end, keep *alert* and always *persevere* in supplication for all the saints".¹⁵

A church that is serious regarding being about God's business, then, will be serious about prayer.

Notice how Paul's call to "pray in the Spirit", implies it is also possible to pray yet not in the Spirit. Paul seems to have prayer in mind here that springs from an immersion in the life of God. Prayer of this sort is not about a wish list asking for this and that on God's behalf (or our own), but a joining in with the one who, though dead has risen and "ever lives to make intercession for those who approach him".¹⁶

When the desperate man approaches Jesus on behalf of his son, Jesus reminds him it is through the prayer of faith¹⁷ that we connect with the unseen and enter into the redemptive work of God. Elsewhere he tells his followers:

Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.¹⁸

¹⁴ Mark 9:2 *c.f.* Luke 9:28.

¹⁵ Ephesians 6:18.

¹⁶ Hebrews 7:25b.

¹⁷ Mark 9:23!

¹⁸ Matthew 8:18-22.