

Gravity or Grace?

A sermon preached by Christopher Baldwin Barnett at St Peter's, Wolvercote on Sunday 30th September 2007 in celebration of the Feast of St Michael and All Angels.

Lections: Genesis 28:10-17, Psalm 103, John 1:47-51, Rev 12:7-12

Well, first of all, I'd like to say that I'm grateful for the opportunity to give today's sermon. Not only has it been a long time since I last preached—about 3 years ago, I'd guess, when I served as an assistant pastor for a small United Methodist congregation in Chicago—but there is something elemental, even primal, about preaching that is often lacking in the academic theological circles in which I currently find myself. Here, in the pulpit, there is little room for chains of footnotes or abstract speculations. What is decisive is the intersection of the Christian tradition, now two millennia old, with the array of lives that encounter it this very morning.

With that said, however, imagine my surprise when I learned that I'd be speaking on the Feast of Michael and All Angels—a celebration that, at first glance, might be seen as a remnant from a bygone era and, therefore, as a matter of pure historical interest. It is, to be sure, a theme that presents a number of difficulties. For one thing, angels do not seem to be central to the Christian faith in the way that, say, the Incarnation is. And so, as modern and, now, postmodern thinking has nipped and tucked at the edges of Christian doctrine, demanding accounts of Christianity that, in one way or another, meet the criteria of the day's intellectual norms, angelology has been forgotten by many in the Protestant world—an unfortunate, but, some would say, necessary 'casualty of war' in the faith's attempt to remain credible in the age of the I-Pod and the satellite.

And yet, it is curious—and, in a certain sense, equally problematic—that angels have retained a remarkably strong hold on popular consciousness. It is not uncommon, at least in the States, to walk into a crafts store and find little wooden

or ceramic angels, which go nicely on a bookshelf or on a coffee table. At Halloween, people often dress up as angels, donning robes of white bed linen and twisted halos of gold-painted aluminium foil. And, of course, angels pop into our language quite regularly. For instance, people still talk freely of 'guardian angels', whether or not they subscribe to a particular religious tradition. That this is so is reflected in the popular media as well, particularly on television and in film. Sweet, even maudlin, TV programs such as *Highway to Heaven* and *Touched by an Angel*—not to be confused with *Charlie's Angels*!—depict angels who participate in human society, getting involved in a variety of charitable causes and generally making sure that folks get on better than they would otherwise. Clearly, then, angels cannot be dismissed as I suggested above, though one would be hard pressed to find substantive links between what might be termed 'mass' angelology and that characteristic of traditional Christian theology.

So, what gives? What are we to make of this situation, where angels seem absent from the cosmic order and yet present in human culture? Such questions, of course, could be approached from a number of angles. Perhaps, one might argue, the West is not as secular as it purports to be. Or maybe human beings possess a religious imagination that is not easily stamped out. What intrigues me, however, is how this popular view of angels paradoxically belies a fascination with, an absorption in, the *human* as such. Take, for example, Wim Wenders' 1987 film, *Wings of Desire*—for my money, one of the finest movies ever made. In this lyrical, leisurely (my wife would say *tedious*!) film, a pair of angels, Damiel and Cassiel, watch over the inhabitants Cold War-era Berlin, inconspicuously tapping into their thoughts and observing their comings and goings. On occasion, these angels meet up and share what they each have witnessed. But one of them, Damiel, has grown tired of this eternally remote work. As he explains in one important conversation, which begins as a report to his partner:

A woman on the street folded her umbrella while it rained and let herself get drenched. A schoolboy who described to his teacher how a fern grows out of the earth, and the astonished teacher. A blind woman who groped for her watch, feeling my presence.... It's great to live only by the spirit, to testify day by day, for eternity, to the spiritual side of people. But sometimes I get fed up with my spiritual existence. Instead of hovering above I'd like to feel there's some weight to me. To end my eternity, and bind me to earth. At each step, at each gust of wind, I'd like to be able to say: 'Now! Now! Now!'. And no longer say: 'Since always' and 'Forever'. To sit in the empty seat at a card table, and be greeted, if only by a nod.... [I]t would be quite something to come home after a long day, like Philip Marlowe, and feed the cat. To have a fever. To have blackened fingers from the newspaper.... To feel your skeleton as you walk. Finally to 'suspect', instead of forever knowing all. To be able to say 'Ah!' and 'Oh!' and 'Hey!' instead of 'Yes' and 'Amen'.

Damiel, then, has become quite taken by human existence, by its limits and eccentricities and interactions. And soon, he is drawn into the life of Marion, a beautiful, yet lonely, trapeze artist, with whom he longs to have a relationship. Hence, in the end, he elects to 'fall', to cast off his eternal nature and to take human flesh. In this sense, he is reminiscent of Christ, albeit with a twist. Damiel's incarnation has no point of reference beyond time; rather, it embraces time itself as all that is worthwhile and, so, as all there really is.

Despite its use of angels, then, what *Wings of Desire* really offers is a celebration of the earthly and the temporal—the choice of gravity over grace, brilliantly captured in the transformation of Damiel's wings, once a diaphanous white, into solid bronze. Likewise, in shows such as *Highway to Heaven*, angelic activity is earthbound, finding its purpose in human affairs, rather than in the divine life. Like those handcrafted wooden angels, which sit so pleasantly on a windowsill, these angels of TV and film have been domesticated, tamed, and, finally, made in *our* image. And if that is not an altogether bad thing—Wenders' work, in particular, illuminates the privilege of just being human—it nevertheless raises troubling questions. After all, one does not have to subscribe to severe understanding of original sin to see that human nature is fragile, flawed, and capable of almost unthinkable cruelty. Thus we have to ask ourselves: in a world

shredded by war and confronted with a looming ecological crisis, is it really comforting to have the divine reduced to the human or, more accurately, to have our purview limited to the human? Is gravity, in other words, truly better than grace?

We are in church, but, perhaps, the answers to these questions are not self-evident. The disenchantment of the world, if I may put it that way, was no accident. And, in some cases, it was brought about for good reason. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling that we have drifted far from the biblical treatment of angels. For instance, in each of the lections appointed for today, it is clear that angels are creatures quite unlike human beings. They are the 'mighty ones' (Psalm 103:20), who move between heaven and earth (Gen 28:12), ever obedient to God's will. Furthermore, according to Jesus, it is they who will confirm his messianic role (John 1:47-51). And, in the book of Revelation, it is angels, led by the Archangel Michael, who cast Satan from heaven, thereby securing the ultimate triumph of good over evil (Rev 12:7-12). But the cosmic import of such roles does not diminish their concern for humanity. Jesus tells of how the angels rejoice over penitent sinners—indeed, over just 'one sinner who repents' (Luke 15:10)—and, of course, it is angels who announce the respective births of John the Baptist and Jesus, passing on 'good news of great joy' (Luke 2:10), even to the lowly shepherds who labour by night.

In Scripture, then, angels are *for* us precisely to the extent that they are *other* than us. And that, I want to suggest, is part of the good news. Even among created things, human beings do not have the last word. There is a kingdom that we do not rule, a realm that lies beyond our mastery. And yet, it is one that still reaches out to us, drawing us, if only we will let it. This theme, I take it, is one of the central concerns of *The Celestial Hierarchy*, one of the definitive texts of Christian angelology. Penned by a 5th Century Syrian monk, who took the biblically-based pseudonym, 'Dionysius the Areopagite', *The Celestial Hierarchy* attempts to make sense of Scripture's rather unsystematic talk about a divine

order that mediates between earthly creation and the triune God. This, says Dionysius, is the angelic domain, and he divides it into 9 orders, starting with the Seraphim and Cherubim, who eternally circle 'in immediate proximity to God', and concluding with the lowest order of angels, who are mostly concerned with revealing God's nature to human beings, since 'no one has ever seen or can see' (1 Tm 6:16) God himself. And yet, Dionysius insists, they are all *angels*, in that each order communicates God's love to the order below it and, in doing so, draws that lower order upward toward God. As he explains:

Compared...with irrational forms of life and indeed with our own rational natures, the holy ranks of [angels] are obviously superior in what they have received of God's largess. Their thinking processes imitate the divine. They look on the divine likeness with a transcendent eye. They model their intellects on him. Hence it is natural for them to enter into a more generous communion with the Deity, because they are forever marching towards the heights.... ...That is why they have a pre-eminent right to the title of angel or messenger [in Greek, *angelion* means 'message' or 'news'], since it is they who first are granted the divine enlightenment and it is they who pass on to us these revelations which are so far beyond us.

Of course, from a certain perspective, *The Celestial Hierarchy* seems a bit too ambitious. Isn't Dionysius biting off more than he can chew, describing a realm about which Scripture only provides hints and suggestions? That may be so. However, in my view, the thrust of his account is basically biblical, and it reinforces what was said earlier—namely, that the angels are not like us, nor should we want them to be. For it is through them that we come to know God, and so progress in our lives as Christians.

Ultimately, then, what we see in the Bible, and in church fathers such as Dionysius, is a much richer view of the cosmos. Theirs is a world in which humanity is not absolute, but, rather, part of a network of created things, each of whom are to move as close to God as possible. Yet, for human beings, who are broken and in need of healing, this cannot be done without angels. Indeed, even the salvific work of Jesus was, in some sense, dependent on the angels, for, as

Dionysius puts it, 'the mystery of Jesus' love for humanity was first revealed to the angels and...the gift of this knowledge was granted by the angels to us'. With this in mind, it is clear that it will not do to consign angelology to the theological dustbin. Scripture and church tradition indicate that it is a subject that ought to be grappled with, not as a mere doctrinal question, but as something with practical implications. After all, to ponder our own limitations is to open up a different view on creation, on our role in it, and on our need for help, for grace. And yet, if that is so, then one cannot help wondering: why do we want the angels to be like us, when, in fact, it our calling to listen to them, to follow them, and to move into deeper communion with God? Why do we pretend that grace is subordinate to gravity, when it is gravity that we are to leave behind?

Amen