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Title of the sermon: The Eyes of Angels

Scripture Texts on which the sermon is based: Revelations 5

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On this Michael Mass day, I wonder if you have ever seen an angel. I don't think I have. I wonder what you imagine angels look like? We all have internal images of what things look like. I know for example, what a lion looks like, so if I encounter one, I could calmly say, oh look, a lion, how interesting. I also have an internal image of a lamb, so if I met one, I would be ready to make a callous joke about mint sauce, my own defence mechanism against the appalling inner conflict over eating something so cute. I wonder, what internal image of angels do you have? Perhaps you imagine a shiny gender fluid person with gorgeous sparkly wings.

Whilst many of the angels in the bible are described in anthropomorphic terms, other heavenly beings described in the bible and the rabbinical material look, and, I apologise for using such a complicated technical theological term, really weird.

Some scholars describe the seraphim as almost dragon like, fire breathing flying serpents, with six wings covered in eyes. Seraphim are presumably very useful when the heavenly host decide to burn some incense, though their description, especially in the light of our anthem, might erroneously lead us to assume that they played for the other side.

The cherubim are not the cutesy chubby winged little boys that adorn whimsical memorials. They are fearsome winged creatures, who stand guard like celestial bouncers, sometimes with four faces, that of a lion, an Eagle, an ox and human being. Bear this in mind when you describe someone's child as a little cherub.

Then there are the ophanim. They are, and I hope they are not easily offended, really, really weird, winged wheels with wheels inside them set at a perpendicular angle to the outer wheels. In Ezekiel's vision they are the wheels of God's chariot, the combination of wings and inner wheels pointing in different directions presumably making them really good for off roading. The wheels and wings are covered in eyes, an abundance of eyes being a feature in common with the other heavenly beings I have just described, all of them belonging to the first order of angels. This then moves our question from "what do we imagine angels look like", to "what do we imagine angels see?" With all those eyes, they must have some interesting perspectives.

I think our revelation reading tonight gives us some insight into this, as the author sees a vision of heaven, and sees what the angels see.

The king of the jungle, Lions are pretty ferocious animals. Apex predators at the top of the food chain, they rule everything the light touches, apart from the shadowy place way out there. The lion of Judah is an honorific title used in Judaism for the promised messiah, the King who will fight for his people and win their freedom from oppression. The Lion of Judah is a symbol of strength, courage and nobility. Its roots come from Jacob's description of his Son Judah as a lion's cub, hence the lion as a symbol of the tribe of Judah and indeed the city of Jerusalem. So when the angel in heaven asks who will open the sealed scroll and the Lion of Judah steps forward, we might expect the angels gathered round to see a mighty, ferocious lion, with a long mane, gigantic paws and awesome abs.

There might be a glimmer of recognition on one of the cherubim's four faces. But what do the angels see? They see the truth. They see as God sees, they see the lamb. When the messiah, the Lion of Judah came to earth, he wasn't just God's servant, he was God the Son, God embodied in flesh and blood. Angels look at the Lion of Judah and see the glory of God, the Might and Majesty of God the Holy Trinity who is unlimited self giving sacrificial love. They look at the lion of Judah and they see a lamb, they see the second person of the divine trinity who gives self utterly and completely to the father and to the spirit, who gives self utterly and completely to us, who loves God, who loves neighbour, who loves even his enemy.

As Neil told us this morning, angels are not to be coopted onto our side in our human struggles and conflicts. Angels have lots of eyes, they don't see things just from our limited point of view. They see as God sees. They see God's glory and majesty, God's might and power, and they recognise it in humble self-giving love.

God of all hope and peace,

Whom angels worship and adore

we bring to you the needs of our broken and hurting world.

Our hearts are breaking with images of lives lost and torn apart by grief, especially in Israel, Palestine and Lebanon, in Russia and Ukraine.

We pray especially for those known to us caught up in those conflicts.

We pray for an end to violence and warfare so that the challenging work of rebuilding may begin.

Preserve us Lord from the vain temptation to coopt the powers of heaven on to our side,

Help us instead to see the world through the eyes of angels, to see the world as you see it, to see you son in the face of our enemies and to affirm our common humanity so that in our differences we may build together for justice and peace.

Help us to be people of self offering love,

Faithful servants of the Lion of Judah,

messengers of the lamb.