

Sunday 29th September 2013 Grahamstown Cathedral 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		PATRONAL FESTIVAL 19th Sunday after Pentecost
Job 38:1-7	Psalm 148:1-6	Revelation 12:7-12
		Matthew 18:1-10
GOD'S LOVE HOLDS US		

“I heard a loud voice in heaven proclaim: ‘This is the time of victory for our God, the time of his power and sovereignty, when his Christ comes to his rightful rule! For the accuser of our brothers, he who day and night accused them before our God, is overthrown.’” (Rev 12:10)

Today, the Feast of St Michael & All Angels, we celebrate the Patronal Festival of our Cathedral. It is a time to look back over the past year with thanksgiving, and see the hand of God. Today marks the high point in our 160 years as a Cathedral. We acknowledge the presence of the angels as they join with us in worship, in witness and in service.

And today is our Dedication Sunday, as we renew our pledge commitment for the year ahead; today is when we are giving our 160 envelopes; and later today is the Cathedral Bring and Picnic at Bot Gardens.

Angels

Angels are strange, frightening creatures. They are not the gentle, sweet faced people that we see in stained glass windows, as they look down lovingly upon us, or the gentle cherubs – pre-school children wearing nighties and wings – that we see on Christmas cards.

Angels are mysterious agents of God’s purpose. They belong to a different order of creation. They are not part of our everyday earthly world. They remind us that God has made a world that we can see and understand – up to a point; but that there is a great deal about our world, our universe, that we don’t know and that doesn’t always make sense.

In the Bible, angels are often rather terrifying beings which we glimpse now and again. They serve God in ways we don't fully see. They are part of the worshipping community gathered round the throne of God. The prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel describe angels as great 'beasts', 'living creatures', flying serpents burning with flames, carrying the chariot of God, filling the Temple in Jerusalem with bellows of adoration, echoing to one another like whales in the ocean.¹ In the book of Revelation, the angels are the warriors, soldiers against the forces of evil, carrying the battle standard, driving Satan out of heaven. They lead us in worship (Psalm 148); they were present at the dawn of creation (Job 38); we find them in the Gospels as messengers, such as the annunciation to Mary; and also times of sadness and terror, such as with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Sometimes a human form appears to give a message from God and something in the event tells the people involved that this is a moment of terror and truth, and they realise that they have met an angel in disguise.²

And sometimes those close to us, those who support us and carry us through our darkest moments, our times of utter despair and desolation and loss, are like angels sent from God to help us.

Life and death

We have all been deeply shaken by the Nairobi terror attack last Saturday, 21st September, the suicide bomb attack on All Saints Church, Peshawar, Pakistan, on Sunday 22nd, as well as by the brutal murder of a young mother, Vuyelwa Dlayedwa, here in Grahamstown, the week before that. Our hearts go out to her family, particularly her daughters, and her friends. She is being buried today, in Mthatha. And people all over the world have been deeply saddened by the attacks in Nairobi, and in Pakistan, and the many, many deaths, as well as the hundreds who were injured. The South African who died in Nairobi,

¹ Williams, R. *Tokens of Trust*, 51

² Williams, 51

James Thomas, was a Cape Town friend of ours; here at the Cathedral we have a number of Kenyan students who worship here; among those seriously wounded is the father of two children at DSG and SAC (the Belcher family). Many of us are hurting, grieving, deeply sad, angry, appalled, at what has happened. The human loss and cost is immense.

We hold before God all who grieve and all who mourn; all the injured, and those caring for them; we pray for all who have been affected by these events; we pray for Kenyan students and children here amongst us in Grahamstown, and for their families; we pray for the church in Kenya, for the Kenyan leadership and government, and for Pakistan.

In a letter to the Archbishop of Kenya this past Monday (23rd September 2013), the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, wrote:

“We have watched events unfold with shock and horror, knowing only that violence and death inevitably beget further conflict and loss of life. Our hearts go out to all those who have lost loved ones, as well as to the injured. We hold them in our hearts and in our prayers...

“And so we pray for the fractured human family, in which such inhumane acts can be perpetrated. Alongside our desire for a swift end to the siege, and for justice to be done, we ask also that God would guide you with his holy wisdom. As you speak and act in response to these terrible events, may you be a channel of God’s grace, to comfort the bereaved, bind up the broken hearted, and proclaim the triumph of our Lord Jesus Christ over both evil and death. In condemning this appalling crime, may you also be able to bring God’s redemptive possibilities into the complex political, historic and religious context in which it arose. May the God whose light shines in the darkness shine through you, as a beacon of the hope and promise that are at the heart of the gospel.”³

Angels around us

³ Media Statement by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, 23rd September 2013

Last week was our Thanksgiving Sunday, when many people came forward to give thanks to God for life, for family, for God's presence and protection. But what does it mean to give thanks at this time, in the midst of darkness, suffering, tragedy, death? How is it possible to give thanks? Surely we thank God for protection and deliverance from danger, for saving us. But what if the worst happens, if tragedy strikes, and it seems as if God's protection has been withdrawn?

On one level, we do trust God for protection and safety and health, in our daily lives, at work, at home, on the roads. We do ask God to bless and strengthen and heal our marriages, our families, our children; to help us find work and employment. When Claire and I walked unscathed away from our recent car accident, we gave thanks to God, and for the professional support of the police and others who stopped to help. We were going slowly, we were wearing safety belts, the airbags were activated – and everything helped and worked. We could have been killed or badly injured. The angels were around us. But... if the worst had happened, the love of God did not and does not desert or leave us.

God's love continues to hold us through disaster and tragedy and suffering and death. The angels of the Lord continue to surround us – even when the bullet strikes or disaster overwhelms us or evil invades our lives. And when the end does come, as it must for us all, it is the angels who lead us into Paradise, into the presence of God, to dwell with Him forever. Nothing “in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be... nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39). These are not empty or light words. As dreadful and pointless as these recent deaths have been – and they are the result of evil and sin and wrong-doing, not the work of God – those who have died, and those of us who are living, are held wonderfully and forever in the love of God.

Death is the end of this life as we know it. But it is also the beginning, the beginning of the perfect life with God beyond the grave. And

when someone dies, even under such tragic circumstances, they pass through death into eternal life, and are with God forever. It is very hard for us who have to cope with loss and grief, with children being orphaned, left without support or parents. But it is through those around us that God's love and strength is given for the road ahead. As bleak as these times are, we are never alone. The angels surround us.

So as we celebrate our Patronal Festival, and continue to celebrate 160 years as a Cathedral, let's remember that the angels of God surround us, they gather with us in worship, they watch over the "little ones" (Matthew 18:10-11) – These "little ones" are you and me when we are powerless or helpless, at our weakest, our most vulnerable; the "little ones" are those who are grieving, those who have lost loved ones; they are the frightened, the lonely, the abused, the fragile, the broken, those who are unstable, those who cannot care for themselves. The angels of God watch over each one.

A final comment: it is deeply sobering that the attacks in Nairobi and in Pakistan, and elsewhere, are led by people who claim to represent the Islamic faith. I do not believe that they represent mainstream Islam. Fundamentalism of any kind, whether it be Muslim, Christian, or any other belief system – including secular fundamentalism - is dangerous, and we must do our best to discern God's voice and guidance. The Cathedral is called to be a sacred space and faith community where prayer and worship is valid; a community where all are welcome; a community that is safe for the vulnerable. I hope that we can find our voice as Anglican Christians and as the Cathedral in the many issues that we face, and not allow ourselves to be silenced.

CONCLUSION

I conclude with a word of thanks – to those who were part of the Holiday Club this past week; to all involved in Project Eden last Sunday; to my wonderful team of colleagues, both ordained and lay, and our lay leadership team of churchwardens, parish councillors, lay ministers, and our many wonderful volunteers; our director of music, choir, musicians, and sacristans, and all who put so much into our

worship, week by week; to this remarkable Cathedral family; to all who pledge and tithe and give faithfully. It is your commitment and generosity that makes this all possible. Let us keep going, as we help strengthen the church and extend the kingdom of God.

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