

St Michael's and All Angels
September 29, 2004

There's a fable by James Thurber that I enjoy. It's probably his most famous fable, so many of you may know it too. "The Unicorn in the Garden:"

Once upon a sunny morning a man who sat in a breakfast nook looked up from his scrambled eggs to see a white unicorn with a golden horn quietly cropping the roses in the garden. The man went up to the bedroom where his wife was still asleep and woke her. "There's a unicorn in the garden," he said. "Eating roses." She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him. "The unicorn is a mythical beast," she said, and turned her back on him. The man walked slowly downstairs and out into the garden. The unicorn was still there; he was now browsing among the tulips. "Here, unicorn," said the man and pulled up a lily and gave it to him. The unicorn ate it gravely. With a high heart, because there was a unicorn in his garden, the man went upstairs and roused his wife again. "The unicorn," he said, "ate a lily." His wife sat up in bed and looked at him, coldly. "You are a booby," she said, "and I am going to have you put in a booby-hatch." The man, who never liked the words "booby" and "booby-hatch," and who liked them even less on a shining morning when there was a unicorn in the garden, thought for a moment. "We'll see about that," he said. He walked over to the door. "He has a golden horn in the middle of his forehead," he told her. Then he went back to the garden to watch the unicorn; but the unicorn had gone away. The man sat among the roses and went to sleep.

And as soon as the husband had gone out of the house, the wife got up and dressed as fast as she could. She was very excited and there was a gloat in her eye. She telephoned the police and she telephoned the psychiatrist; she told them to hurry to her house and bring a strait-jacket. When the police and the psychiatrist arrived they sat down in chairs and looked at her, with great interest. "My husband," she said, "saw a unicorn this morning." The police looked at the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist looked at the police. "He told me it ate a lily," she said. The psychiatrist looked at the police and the police looked at the psychiatrist. "He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead," she said. At a solemn signal from the psychiatrist, the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife. They had a hard time subduing her, for she put up a terrific struggle, but they finally subdued her. Just as they got her into the strait-jacket, the husband came back into the house.

"Did you tell your wife you saw a unicorn?" asked the police. "Of course not," said the husband. "The unicorn is a mythical beast." "That's all I wanted to know," said the psychiatrist. "Take her away. I'm sorry, sir, but your wife is as crazy as a jaybird." So they took her away, cursing and screaming, and shut her up in an institution. The husband lived happily ever after.

Moral: Don't count your boobies until they are hatched.

It was this story that soon came into my mind when I discovered I was scheduled to preach on the day commemorating St. Michael and All Angels. Are there angels in the garden or not? If not, whatever should they look like? Or isn't it true that angels, like demons or unicorns, are mythical creatures, characters appropriate more to fables and fairy tales than to Scripture and sacred song?

But, then, Scripture itself is not bereft of its mythological features. In an essay assigned when I was a student in seminary more than 40 years ago that great German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann wrote the following:

The cosmology of the New Testament is essentially mythical in character. The world is viewed as a three-storied structure, with the earth in the center, the heaven above, and the underworld beneath. Heaven is the abode of God and of celestial beings – the angels. The underworld is hell, the place of torment. Even the earth is more than the scene of natural, everyday events, of the trivial round and common task. It is the scene of the supernatural activity of God and his angels on the one hand, and of Satan and his demons on the other. These supernatural forces intervene in the course of nature and in all that humans think and will and do. . . . History does not follow a smooth unbroken course; it is set in motion and controlled by these supernatural powers. This æon is held in bondage by Satan, sin, and death (for "powers" is precisely what they are), and hastens towards its end. That end will come very soon, and will take the form of a cosmic catastrophe. It will be inaugurated by the "woes" of the last time. Then the Judge will come from heaven, the dead will rise, the last judgment will take place, and human beings will enter into eternal salvation or damnation.

All this is the language of mythology, and the origin of the various themes can be easily traced in the contemporary mythology of Jewish Apocalyptic and in the redemption myths of Gnosticism. To this *extent the kerygma [the preaching of the Gospel] is incredible to modern people, for we are convinced that the mythical view of the world is obsolete.*

“We are convinced that the mythical view of the world is obsolete.” Are we? Our treatment of angels is evidence that we are. It's true that there remains a lot of interest in angels even today. One of the films I just watched is even named “Angels in America.” It features a prominent and absurdly pompous angel (Emma Thompson) with huge unmoving feathery wings accompanied by thunderous roars and exploding walls and windows. In the movie “Wings of Desire,” Wim Wenders shows us angels longing to have human feelings like us. Not so long ago angel greeting cards and angel kitsch of all kinds were “in” and you saw the little nordic faces of sweet cherubs everywhere. A common bumper sticker declares “Angels on board.” Of course, at Christmas time we are regaled with images of angels, while choirs sing “Angels we have heard on high” and “Angels from the realms of glory.”

What all of these images of angels have in common (with the possible exception of the angelic Christmas carols) is that the angels they portray are nothing at all like the angelic hosts trumpeted in biblical lore—those fiery and fearful cosmic armies doing apocalyptic battle in the heavens when they are not aiding us in our pint-sized battles here at home. No one who lived in the biblical period would have conceived of angels as cute or chummy or funny or pathetic, as they come off in most modern representations. But for several centuries angels have been so sentimentalized, romanticized, psychologized, and domesticated that we come to view them as kindly uncles or cute little toddlers or just objects of humor or curiosity—rather like Thurber’s unicorn in the garden. We cannot help it. Our world is not the world of first century apocalyptic, and we cannot will or imagine our way back into that world. We may hold on to the shell of its vocabulary, but the heart of its meaning will necessarily elude us.

The church has recognized this fact. Old hymnals had sections of hymns devoted to St Michael’s and All Angels. Not the LBW, which lists the commemoration but no assigned hymns (though three hymns are listed under “Angels” in an index). In *With One Voice* you find nothing about angels except scant mention of the word hidden here and there among hymns on other subjects.

What most of us do intuitively and unconsciously is demythologize angels and demons. We think of them metaphorically, symbolically, or we avoid thinking of them much at all, the better not to have to confront the awkwardness of their mythic character. We sing such hymns as there are and try not to dwell on their literal meaning.

Sometimes the mythical character becomes too incongruous to dismiss, as in this hymn we sang in my congregation on Sunday. It went along so nicely for a verse:

Praise the one who breaks the darkness with a liberating light;
Praise the one who frees the prisoners, turning blindness into sight.
Praise the one who preached the Gospel, healing every dread disease,
Calming storms and feeding thousands with the very bread of peace.

Then came the second verse (Tune: Nettleton):

Praise the one who blessed the children, with a strong yet gentle word;
Praise the one who drove out demons with a piercing, two-edged sword.

Next to me Judy, my wife, impulsively let out an incredulous and embarrassingly audible “What?!” Later she told me that she had misread the small print of the hymn to say “praise the one who drove out demons with a pleasant two-edged sword.” Nonetheless the line is incongruous in its context, and during the rest of the hymn I was stuck on trying to remember whether Jesus ever actually drove out a demon with a “two-edged sword,” piercing, pleasant, or otherwise. Oh, stupid me, the sword part is a metaphor, isn’t it? But aren’t the demons a metaphor too, at least for us in the 21st century? Aren’t they and the angelic armies, led by

Michael the archangel, a fantasy of another age, characters in a myth that is no longer—and should no longer be—our myth?

I think our celebration of St Michael's and All Angels has a different role today than it once did. To me it is a flat-out, in-your-face acknowledgement and celebration of the versatility and malleability of faith. Our experience of God and the specific features that experience contains change with the times, and they should. Our world changes. Reality changes. The myths we live by change. The demons and angels of the biblical era have become the germs and antibiotics of today, the electrons and energy pulses, the forces unleashed by the atom and the internet, by air travel and space flight, by neuroscience and stem research. When President Clinton learned his arteries were clogged, he didn't need an exorcism; he needed a by-pass. He didn't need a guardian angel; he needed a super-competent medical team, and some dependable and generous medical insurance.

That's our world, and God is here in this world, surrounding us as always with the messengers of God's good pleasure and God's good will. I guess we can still sing the old hymns for their poetry and their sentiment and their metaphorical beauty. The challenge and the invitation offered to us by this commemoration is not to de-mythologize the biblical world, as Bultmann suggested, but to re-mythologize it into the natural wonders, lively artifacts, and mythic constructs that have immediate meaning and power for us today:

- The glowing sun rising unfailingly in its splendor day after day after day.
- The bees buzzing inquisitively about a patch of dappled flowers.
- The smile on the infant's face gazing up at its nursing mother.
- The fuzzy, adoring Airedale lapping at your face and dancing its exultant jig when you enter your house after a day away.
- The medications that keep your lover alive when his immune system has been destroyed.
- The plane that raises you up in Oakland and once again sets you safely down in Seattle, where you are welcomed by loving, expectant family.
- The passage from St. Paul's letters—in Greek—that you discover you actually half comprehend.
- The gentle, intimate kiss that—if for only a moment—transports you out of the daily round and restores to you the conviction that all is well with the world.

Gerard Manley Hopkins has written:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It flames out like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

The life of faith is about noticing and celebrating God's messengers for our day. Our joy and our delight is to have eyes open to see and ears to hear *today's* signals of the gracious presence of God. Then we can wish St. Michael and all the angelic battalions a peaceful retirement.