

## Lent 1 : St Thomas on The Bourne Feb 18<sup>th</sup> 2018

Mark 1, 13.

**He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.**

My earliest memory of the portrait of an angel was in a print pinned to a pitch-pine church-hall room next to a red- hot Tortoise stove which gave off carbon monoxide fumes on an industrial scale. The picture showed a young child of about six years of age climbing on a fence .The fence separated the child from a stream...and behind the child was an angel, hovering, you might say, as if about to stop the child falling into the water.

Even at a young age, I was not convinced.

In the village in which I grew up I had already known too many tragedies to fall for the myth of guardian angels...if a child can be saved by a guardian angel, why not all those others whose lives had been obliterated too early?

Please don't get me wrong. I wanted to believe in guardian angels, but couldn't.

Which has left me with a problem.

In today's gospel Mark is quite clear: Jesus, after his baptism, 'was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts and angels ministered to him' How am I to interpret such a verse?

I think that on the surface it is a kind of journalistic shorthand: 'Forty days', as we all know, was a way of saying "a long time". "Wild beasts" refers, perhaps, to Jesus' own psychological torments, or alternatively, to a symbolic picture of Jesus living serenely with wild animals like the prophecy in Isaiah where the lion and lamb lie down together and the child is unharmed by scorpions... it's a foretaste of the Kingdom. And the 'angels' ministering to Jesus symbolise God's over-arching compassionate concern.

That interpretation helps, though the explanation feels a bit too facile. And it doesn't quite answer all my questions.

For example, Mark is actually very sparing indeed in his mention of angels: Mark has only a handful of references to angels in his Gospel, whereas Luke has over 24 references to them. Luke obviously has a bit of a thing about angels. Even in the stories of the resurrection Mark does not mention angels at the tomb, whereas both Luke and Matthew have accounts of the women having "visions of angels". Mark is much more enigmatic, he refers to 'a young man sitting on the right hand side, [of the tomb] wearing a white robe...' By which we are perhaps meant to understand that he was actually referring to an angel, but he doesn't say so.

Well. It's not much to go on. But it seems to suggest Mark was extremely sparing in his terminology about angels, and that all the usual panoply of angels and cherubim and seraphim was not really Mark's line of country. He was too matter-of-fact, too honest and too careful for those kinds of Baroque and glittering arabesques.

So, why does he write the verse? Why does he create a verse which seems so out of character, a verse in which angels feature so strongly?

I can only think that he wrote it as a kind of flash of lightning; a way of introducing us to a judder of holiness, a landslide which reveals the being of God as seen in Jesus.

After all, it is apocalyptic stuff...the Satan, the wilderness, wild beasts and angels...all crammed into one brief sentence. It's as though he is saying to us...don't be too literal, see what I have written as an icon, a window on the cosmic drama in which Christ is taking part. These are the forces with which Jesus is confronted; these are the forces now let loose in this one man's soul. These are the universal realities which lie behind our everyday world...

It's all a long way from the sentimental picture of a Guardian Angel; a long way from people writing to the bereaved that the dead loved one now 'flies with the angels'. This is a sentence about the very structures of the world we inhabit, a reminder that eternity can and does break into time. It's a jolting reminder that as we wrestle with truth, and as we walk the way of the Cross.... we shall receive a glimpse of the true cosmic drama, a drama which encompasses not only death but also Easter and the glorious promise of Resurrection....