

Michael and All Angels

Today the Church celebrates the feast of Michael and All Angels. This is of particular relevance to the Community of the Cross of Nails since that is the dedication of Coventry Cathedral. The visit some of us made to Coventry last year reminded me how striking the sculpture by Jacob Epstein is. This depicts the victory of the archangel Michael over the devil described in our reading just now from the Book of Revelation (Revelation 12.7-12).

Michael stands in triumph with his wings spread upwards and his spear in his hand. Interestingly the spear points upwards whereas we may have expected it to point downwards instead. For below him lies the devil looking up towards him. What particularly struck me is how human these figures are. They are not standard stylized images of an angel and the devil. Rather they are depicted as real human beings.

The narrative in the Book of Revelation may well be difficult for modern tastes. We may prefer simply to see the underlying symbolism of good triumphing over evil. And that is a message that quite rightly gives us hope in a world in which there is so much violence, cruelty, bloodshed, hatred, oppression and prejudice.

I would suggest that Epstein's sculpture, with its so very human features, helps to express a more contemporary message. That is perhaps not surprising as it was created in 1958 when the effects of the Second World War were still quite raw.

It is easy to blame the ills of the world on God or on the devil. That way we can gloss over human responsibility. For it was through purely human agency that Coventry Cathedral was destroyed on the night of the 14th of November 1940.

The cynic might say that Michael the protector of Christians did not do anything to help the cathedral dedicated in his name on that fateful night, let alone the 176 people who were killed, the 680 who were injured and the many more who lost their homes. Of course the death toll could have been a lot worse, as was the case in many German cities. So perhaps the criticism is unfair.

For human beings have both the capacity and the choice to do good or to commit evil. In practice good and evil are intertwined. When evil is committed there can still be glimmers of goodness shining through. That is true not only of the Second World War but also of the conflicts taking place in our world today.

And so as we celebrate the feast of Michael and All Angels let us give thanks for Coventry Cathedral which rose out of the ashes to become a place of reconciliation, forgiveness and peace.

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