

Thought for the Day in Lent, focusing on tricky words in the Bible

Monday 8 – Sunday 14 March by Rev. Bill Church

Monday 8th

Tricky word No. 22 – Angel



*'Guardian angel girt with wings
of azure, green and gold,
Keep me safe from evil things,
for me those wings unfold.'*
(Child's bedtime prayer written by my
grandmother)

But biblical angels did not have wings – God has wings (Psalm 57. 1 etc) and Seraphim (see tomorrow's Thought) had wings (Isaiah 6. 2).

Angels are plentiful in Old and New Testaments, sometimes described as men, or men in white.

Biblical angels are multi-taskers – regularly as God's messengers (the word comes from the Greek for messenger); and as provisioners (1 Kings 19. 5), stonerollers (Matthew 28. 2) or highway obstructions (Numbers 22. 22).

The church is fond of hierarchies and has given the rank of Archangel to three angels named in the Bible – Michael the warrior (Revelation 12. 7), Gabriel the messenger (Luke 1. 19, 26) and Raphael the healer (Tobit 6. 9).

Angels do not have their own agenda (except Lucifer, and look what happened to him), so what is the line, or is there a line, between the action of angels and of God himself? And in the Old Testament, they sometimes seem to merge, as in Exodus 3 (the burning bush) or Genesis 18 (the visit to Abraham so wonderfully illustrated in Rublev's icon).

In our more sceptical age it may be easier to see angels as a rather quaint way of describing God's interactions with mankind, and 'angel' has been domesticated as a term of recommendation, as in 'She is an absolute angel', or to name an unspeakable dessert, 'Angel Delight', and the Angel of Mons, covering the British retreat in 1914 seems to have been a patriotic myth.

But angels are a reminder that God cares about, and is concerned with, his world and those who live in it.

*Do not neglect to show hospitality;
by doing this, some have entertained angels unawares.
(Hebrews 13. 12)*

Tuesday 9th

Tricky word No. 23 – Cherubim (and Seraphim)



*'I believe in one God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
and of all things visible and invisible.'*
(Nicene Creed)

I prefer this to the Common Worship wording 'seen and unseen'. Unseen suggests something overlooked or just over the horizon. Invisible means something beyond the possibility of human sight.

What do you make of these words in the Creed?

A reverent and reasonable modern take would be that they mean things like the laws of physics or mathematics, all of which are as much part of God's creation as flowers and trees.

But the authors of the Creed meant the non-material beings who attended on God and did his work.

The church listed seven, a biblically auspicious number: Angels and Archangels, Cherubim and Seraphim, Thrones, Principalities and Powers. All are biblical.

Cherubim (just the plural of cherub) were not cherubic in the modern sense and not at all like the pudgy infants so popular on 18th Century tombs, including in the Cowper Chapel at St Mary's. The cherubim guarding the entrance to the Garden of Eden after the expulsion of

Adam and Eve (Genesis 3. 24) were terrifying enforcers of God's decree.

Later, statues of cherubim guarded the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25) and the Holy of Holies in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6). (I haven't worked out how that complied with the Second Commandment.)

Seraphim (just the plural of seraph) appear in Isaiah's vision in the Temple (Isaiah 6) as attendants of God, singing praises and acting to purify Isaiah from guilt.

They are seen as emphasising the glory of God.

Let the bright Seraphim in burning row

Their loud uplifted Angel-trumpets blow.

Let the cherubic host in tuneful choirs

Touch their immortal harps with golden wires.

Let their celestial concerts all unite

Ever to sound His praise in endless blaze of light.

(From Handel's Oratorio 'Samson')

Irrelevant postscript: Saint Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) is revered as one of the greatest mystics of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Wednesday 10th

Tricky word No. 24 – Dominion



*'God blessed (human beings) and said to them
"Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and
subdue it, have dominion over the fish in the
sea, the birds of the air, and every living thing
that that moves on the earth.'"
(Genesis 1. 28)*

That verse in Genesis, and God's words to Noah and Psalm 8, all assert that mankind has dominion - the God-given right to exercise power over the whole of creation.

That right has been exercised in all ages and on all continents. Even societies which we would reckon primitive have hunted species to extinction. Modern mankind is not only much more numerous but also much better equipped and has had a devastating effect on the natural world.

For most of history, mankind, and the church, has assumed an unfettered dominion over nature, so it is not surprising that many young people say the church has not done enough to combat climate change and to protect the environment.

The biblical basis for a more ecological approach would be in the commandment to love your neighbour, because this crisis threatens people as well as plants and animals. The Old Testament has hints that mankind's dominion over nature is not unfettered. First, because God's dominion is always paramount; and second, in commands to treat domestic animals properly (Deuteronomy 25. 4 - letting your ox eat properly during work) and wild animals prudently (Deuteronomy 22. 6 - not taking a mother bird off her nest).

Even though we still assert that humanity is 'The crown of all creation' (Eucharistic Prayer G), we are fellow creatures of God, which ought to inspire humility, as well as common sense, in treating the rest of God's creation.

'Consider the birds of the air.... consider the lilies of the field'
(Matthew. 6. 26, 28)

Thursday 11th

Tricky word No. 25 – Sin



'Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi'
Lamb of God you take away the sins of the
world
(Latin Mass)

'Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world'
(Common Worship Order One)

Why the difference? One is purely practical. The Latin for 'sin' would be 'peccatum'. It is difficult to say 'peccatum mundi' and (though I have not consulted the choir) even more difficult to sing it.

And there is a real difference. For centuries, since Pope Gregory the Great (in office 590-604), the church has used a list – the Seven Deadly Sins – for self-examination and confession. They are deeply rooted in our understanding of sin.

Can you list them? *

But, in truth, all of those are really symptoms rather than the root cause, which is separation from God. This distorts perception, dulls our conscience and cuts us off from God's grace (see Alan's thought on 18 February).

The list of seven sins is valuable to prompt us to see where we have gone wrong.

It is a pointer, not the end of the process.

*'Almighty God, our heavenly Father
We have sinned against you and against our neighbour
In thought and word and deed
Through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate
fault.'*

(Confession in Holy Communion)

*Pride, Anger, Lust, Gluttony, Sloth, Envy, Avarice

Friday 12th

Tricky word No. 26 – Justified



*'Therefore we conclude that man is justified by
faith without the deeds of the law'
(Romans 3. 28)*

Today, if we say we are 'justified' it usually means proved right in an argument or vindicated in a dispute. Paul did not mean that. He was using the Greek transitive verb 'dikaio', for which there is no direct English equivalent. We do not have a verb 'to righteous'. The best version would be 'to put into a right relationship with God', which does not trip off the tongue.

So, faith must not be a cause of pride or self-righteousness.

Faith is a gift which should be received humbly and should be shared rather than used as a mark of superiority over those who, in our opinion, do not have faith.

The doctrine of justification by faith is the subject of one of the most exaggerated disputes in the New Testament.

Paul insisted on justification by faith but assumed this would lead to acts of goodness (Galatians 5. 22-23).

James saw acts of goodness as a necessary concomitant of faith (James 2. 14-26).

Neither thought 'the deeds of the law' (that is, ritual observances) would alone make you right with God.

*'But the tax collector...beat his breast,
saying "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"
I tell you, this man went down to his house justified...'
(Luke 18. 13-14)*

Saturday 13th

Tricky word No. 27 – Miserable



*'O Lord have mercy upon us, miserable
offenders.'*
(Book of Common Prayer, Confession at Morning
and Evening Prayer)

This does seem a less than cheerful opening to worship and the church has at times put rather too much emphasis on the sinfulness of humankind.

'Miserable' is a word with pretty negative tones, but it does have another meaning – capable of receiving mercy.

Psalm 67 is headed 'Deus misereatur' – 'God be merciful unto us'.

So 'miserable offenders' are not only wretched sinners but also sinners capable of being forgiven.

Years ago, we saw a play, 'The Last Days of Judas Iscariot', imagining his trial in the afterlife for betraying Jesus. Part farce, part serious, at the end Judas cannot overcome the idea that his sin is beyond forgiveness and, therefore, he will not ask for forgiveness – and, therefore, he is condemned.

The journey of forgiveness starts with a recognition that you have done wrong and want to put things right, but has also to include the recognition that you are capable of receiving God's mercy. The Bible is full of assurance that 'if we confess our sins, he is just and may be trusted to forgive us our sins' (1 John 1. 9).

'The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.'
(Shakespeare – The Merchant of Venice)

Sunday 14th

Tricky word No. 28 – Right hand



'If I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.'
(Psalm 137. 5)

The right hand is used as a symbol of human strength and skill (although the Bible also applauds Ehud the left-handed assassin – Judges 3. 12-30).

And, so, the idea was transferred to the power of God:
'*With his right hand, the Lord does mighty deeds*' (Psalm 118. 16).

But I want to think about another use of right hand:
'*The Lord Jesus... took his seat at the right hand of God*' (Mark 16. 19); '*He has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of majesty in heaven*' (Hebrews 8. 1).

The Bible is using language derived from human rulers to express ideas about the greatness of God. This can be risky. Take the festival of Christ the King, now inserted into our calendar. What does that say to the USA or France, whose foundation story is about getting rid of kings? Or indeed to us, where our monarch is respected and loved but has no real power?

And what, if anything, do modern readers infer from Jesus sitting 'at the right hand'? Certainly, that Jesus resumed his place in the heavenly sphere after the Ascension, but otherwise details of courtly seating arrangements mean little. Earlier readers, however, might have thought about the habit of regal courts where (and I have not been able to verify this) in medieval western Europe, the heir sat at the King's right hand –presumably waiting his turn to rule – but in the later eastern Roman empire, the right hand was reserved for the co-ruler, a much better Trinitarian concept.

Or can we think of Jesus as the right hand of God, by which he has done mighty deeds? Or by which he has blessed us?

'Then little children were brought to [Jesus] in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray... and he laid his hands on them.'
(Matthew 19. 13, 15)