

The Angels of Caux

Bible texts: Jacob's dream, Gen.28. 1 0-22; Peter's release from prison, Acts 12.1-17; the road to Emmaus, Luke 24.13-32.

I vividly recall being delegated to help an African friend prepare for a sermon here to be broadcast live on the radio - it was for the 50th anniversary of the conference centre down the hill. The sermon had to be something like 17 minutes 30 seconds - give or take 15 seconds. A terribly difficult task for anyone, but my African friend found it almost impossible. 'At home,' he told me, 'he preached until he felt that his entire congregation had been truly converted.' But rest reassured: I will try to stick to my text and then stop!

'This is nothing less than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven,' said the reading from Genesis. I wanted us to think together this morning about what this chapel and its decorations have to tell us about God and his ways, and I hope that at the end of the service, you may feel encouraged to take a closer look at the windows and carvings.

I could talk about food, and its importance in the Bible, and in Jesus' life and work. (It also plays such an important part in the life of the Conference centre down the hill from here.) There is this carving of Christ's first miracle, at Cana in Galilee, the wedding where he turned water into good wine. And on the other side, we can see the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, the feeding of the multitude. God's promise to feed his people. They both lead us naturally on to the Last Supper, above, where Christ breaks and shares the bread, and passes the cup. They are powerful reminders of this central mystery of our faith, which we continue to celebrate, as He asked us to.

But as a Protestant and a Calvinist, I'm especially intrigued by the angels. My own personal belief is that angels come in all shapes and sizes, and only rarely with wings, though the idea of wings goes back a very long way in time, and is presumably linked with the idea of getting around fast on God's business, and moving back and forth, linking heaven and earth! But before going into a more personal meditation, I'd like to tell you something of the history of this chapel, and of reconciliation between two villages, perhaps a little in the spirit of the conference taking place down the hill in Mountain House. You may be surprised to learn that the Swiss also need this are of healing the wounds of history.

The chapel, dedicated to Saint Michael and All Angels, opened in 1906. It was built for the English, Anglican tourists of those years, before the Second World War, around whom the economy of Caux and Montreux developed. (Saint Michael, himself an archangel, is the patron saint of the angels.) The war, and then the economic crises of the inter-war years were an iceberg on which this Titanic of hotels slowly sank. The village fell on hard times with its hotels, and with them, the chapel, and by the start of the Second World War, the chapel was falling into disrepair.

Now across the valley from here lies the village of Les Avants, where there is also an Anglican chapel, dating from the same period, a chapel that had been taken over by the local, French-speaking Reformed parish, and thus saved from decay. With the agreement of those responsible here, some of the people from Les Avants came and took the altar table, and four of the angels from the roof beams. Then in 1944,

the Reformed parish of Montreux took over the Caux chapel. A separate association was formed, and restoration work was started. And that was when the rumours started: the people from Les Avants had come and stolen the angels. There was no danger of war between the two villages, but there was a certain ill-feeling, and it went on for a long time, until one of the committee of the Caux chapel association, and also a member of the Montreux parish council, had the thought that he should do something to change things. Some of you may know him, he is René Thonney, now retired in Glion, but for many years the cashier of the Caux conference centre, and one of its pioneers. You can see his photo in the Caux Expo.

The people from Caux looked up the archives, studied their history, and apologised for the ill-informed rumours and accusations. And in an unmasked-for gesture, the people of Les Avants decided to return the altar table, and two of the angels. They formally came back home in 1980 - some reconciliations take a lot of time. And if you visit the chapel in Les Avants, as I have, you will see the two other angels there, as silent witnesses to the reconciliation between the two villages.

But to come back to the angels. They are part of a spiritual world that I know little of, that we rational, scientific, late-Twentieth Century, modern men and women don't think much about, unless we're pushed. And I've been pushed, by this chapel. In 1992, some of us here lost a very dear friend, Regula Borel, who died after a long battle with cancer. At the end of the winter conference, on the 3rd of January, the first Sunday of the New Year, we held a service here. That day, from where you are sitting, I looked at the ladder that took Christ to his Cross - you can see it there, behind me, in the hands of a worker. And I remembered Regula's hospital room, in which she died. A crucifix was hanging on the wall there, and beside it, the shadow on the wall-paper where another cross must have hung. It seemed to me, Christ's Cross was there, with another's beside it, our friend's.

But later, as I stood on the altar steps for Communion, I looked at the window behind you, and I wept, for I saw another ladder, the ladder between heaven and earth, that links us with all those who have gone before, to whom we owe our faith, who have played an important part in our lives, who have loved us, and whom we have loved. And I was comforted. This world is a preparation for another, and it is not cut off entirely from the other. There are moments, places, and people, when we come close. Moments of real encounter, as Paul Tournier put it.

This instant of grace took me back to another moment, another brush with the spirits of the other world, that also took place here in Caux, another moment that means a great deal to me. Perhaps if my sight was clearer, I might have seen an angel. I had experienced a broken engagement, and life seemed to have lost all meaning, all savour. I seemed to be shut up in some dark place, to be hammering on a door that was closed to me. And one morning, early, I read the passage from the Acts of the Apostles, of Peter's escape from prison, and there was some spiritual presence in the room with me, and I seemed to hear a voice, saying as it had said to Peter, 'Come on, wake up, let's get out of here.' And the door was open; I could walk out into the light. I was free. And I was loved. And I was forgiven.

But I am not much of a mystic. The dictionary under 'angel' talks of 'a ministering

spirit or divine messenger, the attendants and messengers of the deity, God's servants'. Aren't we all called to be attendants and messengers to others, God's servants? The Greek and Hebrew words for angel make no distinction between supernatural messengers and human beings. In a world where life inevitably brings its lot of pain and suffering - along with all its joys, and they are many - where even rumours of angels can make enemies and divide villages, God's Spirit can bring healing, and open doors, that are closed. But His Spirit may sometimes need to flow through us to others, to a world in need. We are called to be ministering spirits, angels even - have you noticed how we say 'O, you are an angel', when someone does something nice for us?

We are never alone in this task. As for the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus is always there, an often unseen, unnoticed companion on our road, whatever that road may be. Sometimes He can work through us or others like us, and sometimes in more mysterious ways, which one day we may understand better, opening prison doors, letting in the light.

Amen.

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