

Easter Vigil 2018

In the book of the prophet Malachi we read of ‘the angel of the covenant, in whom you delight.’ It is not a text that immediately comes to mind when we celebrate Easter but I’d like us to think again. In Matthew’s gospel this morning we hear the words of the angel at the tomb speaking to the two women: ‘indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him. This is my message for you.’ Is this the same angel?

The Carmelite church in Rome was a significant patron of musicians in the 17th and 18th centuries. For its patronal festival each year, it commissioned a significant contemporary composer to create music and paid for a professional orchestra and vocal soloists to perform it on the feast day. It was, and still is, a church with a gallery across the west door, and sometimes elaborate temporary extensions were also made at the west end to accommodate the extra musical forces needed. One year early in the 19th century, the effect was so compelling that the congregation eventually all turned to face the gallery with their backs to the sanctuary. Like Queen Victoria, the Carmelite commissioners were not amused. Next year, the commission went out with a significant rider, that the music had to be of a character not to draw attention away from the sanctuary. All eyes forward — and nowhere else.

These words are not mine. They were spoken by the preacher at my ordination to the priesthood in the Cathedral of the Most Holy Trinity, Wangaratta. The preacher, the late Canon Dr Colin Holden went on: I recount this incident as a prelude to inviting you to turn your backs on the sanctuary for a few moments. I want you to look at the window at the west end of the church which I am sure you all have observed at other times, and refresh your memories. And yes we all turned around to look at the west end.

Now I’m going to ask you to do the same. Our west window is a strange one, like nothing else I have ever seen in a church and when I first came into St Philip’s with the parish nominators I noticed it immediately and since that time I have pondered it! I think it might be growing on me (just)! The window doesn’t relate a Biblical story, an event in the life of Jesus, an apostle or some Old Testament character, indeed it has some rather pagan overtones, which perhaps may shock you. But the genius of Christianity is the way we have taken other ideas and made them our own. Think of Easter and the great fertility festivals of the pre Christian world of northern Europe.

Our window which is sub titled the ‘Dance of Life,’ depicts five figures, four of them represent elements of air, fire, water and earth; the fifth carries a rainbow. The four elements feature frequently in the Old Testament, some of them featured last night as we waited and watched in vigil:

The light blue figure is airthe Hebrew ruach or rushing wind of creation which hovered over the void at the beginning of time. Represented here by the Australian Kookaburra.

The earth, represented by the green figure holding a native bluebell is the ground of our being, the very dust from which we were made.

The dark blue figure with the fish represents the water – the life giver which Ezekiel describes flowing from the temple.

The orange figure carrying fire represents the presence of God in the burning bush that burns but does not consume.

All these elements feature in our New Testament tradition. The Holy Spirit of Pentecost is described as both a rushing wind and as fire. Water is prominent - Jesus says to the Samaritan woman at the well: The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life and the dust from which we are made is sanctified by the coming of Jesus, the word made flesh.

That leaves us with the fifth, the magenta figure holding the rainbow, the sign of covenant. Is this Malachi's angel of the covenant? A covenant represents a coming together, dance is a coming together, so our window could very well be described as an Easter window, because the dance of life is an Easter dance. It is the dance between our physical bodies and their life, what the Greeks called bios from which we get biology, and the life that Paul spoke of this morning the life that the Greeks called Zoe! Our dance is between the very matter of our bios existence and the new life Zoe in the spirit which is the life of the resurrected Christ in which we share. In Christ the two are bound together.

So the four elements representing our earthiness and our spirit are brought together by the fifth magenta figure the angel of the covenant. This covenant is the coming together of our earthly and spiritual lives and reaches its pinnacle in the new covenant mediated in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' body as Peter wrote 'was put to death in the flesh but raised in the spirit;' so today we celebrate his glorious body.

This has ramifications for everything! Like all Christian doctrine it has practical ramifications. The angel of the covenant is the angel of the future, covenants are future focused, think of the 'I will' in the marriage covenant! Dare we believe that this angel of the covenant is the angel at the tomb who encouraged the women to go and find Jesus - *who is going ahead of you...going ahead...he is your future.*

Many have tried to prove or disprove the resurrection of Christ in history, they have been unsuccessful because the resurrection of Christ is all about the future. It is about the way we live now and forever; renewed, restored, empowered, enlivened, because Christ is risen...He is risen indeed. Amen.