

In the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation, the rather mysterious author, often known as 'John the Divine' has a vision of Jesus. In the vision he imagines Jesus speaking to a group of churches located within Roman settlements around the Mediterranean. John expresses Jesus' words in letterform. The letters include words of challenge and encouragement, but also rebuke. Intriguingly, the letters are addressed to the 'angel' of the church.

I don't know how you imagine angels? Perhaps as large heavenly beings of indeterminate gender and with feathery wings? In the context of these letters that would seem not to be the case. Rather the 'angels' represent the 'character' or the corporate 'personality' of the churches. Interestingly, the 'angel', the 'character', the 'personality' is not a given. It isn't fixed. It can be changed and shaped. The churches in Revelation are encouraged to review and reform the nature of their angel in response to the challenges within the letters.

The Laodicean church, the subject of Revelation 3:14 - 22, does not fare too well. The angel is told bluntly that it is neither hot nor cold. Rather it, the angel, the character of the church, has become luke warm and foul tasting. The angel of the church is accused of thinking itself rich, prosperous and in need of nothing else and is informed that it is in fact blind and pitiful. What is going on here?

The church is instructed to apply salve to its eyes and clothe itself in white garments. The rebuke would seem to be to a church that has thrown in its lot with the society that surrounds it. It has lost or blunted its prophetic critique of its society and become indistinct from it. Laodicea was a very wealthy city, known for its fine black woollen cloth and an ointment that helped restore sight. The instruction to wear white clothes and apply the salve would seem to be an ironic rebuke. Laodicea was also infamous for its tepid water, which was drawn from hot and cold springs in neighbouring cities via extensive aqueducts. By the time the water reached Laodicea it was neither hot nor cold. The rebuke to the angel of the church draws on this feature of the city's water supply.

Gail and I were at the Greenbelt Festival last week. We attend a talk by Paula Gooder, a pre-eminent New Testament theologian. Her theme was all about using our imagination as we interpret the Bible. That's what I am now going to attempt to do. I cannot claim, like John, to have a vivid vision of Jesus in Harrow Weald. Nor have I been commissioned to write any letters to angels. However, I'm going to have a go at imagining just such a letter to the 'angel of All Saints' - All Saints' corporate personality.

So here goes.

'To the angel of the church of All Saints' in Harrow Weald:

I know your works; they reflect your good will and cheerfulness.

You have known deep divisions and pain which at one time threatened you witness. You have overcome this. However, guard your hearts to ensure that in times of change and uncertainty any lingering shadows do not rise up to haunt you.

You have embraced change creatively and can be proud that as the people of God in this place and at this time, you punch above your weight. Your service to and within the local community is well known and highly regarded.

You have welcomed strangers into your fellowship and shown them generous hospitality - but there is more to do to grow the friendship with the Mar Thoma community. Mutual blessing is to be found in shared worship and shared meals. The unity between two largely distinct ethnic communities offers a model to our wider community. It is a prophetic act. Be sure to welcome the new Mar Thoma vicar when he arrives at Easter time.

The Holy Spirit is abroad, disturbing and calling people into unforeseen adventures and acts of service. Be open to such surprises and opportunities. The angel of the church has seen many step up to the mark in all sorts of unexpected ways in recent years.

The Holy Spirit has also brought healing and restoration to members of the church. Do not lose heart in praying for one another.

Deep within the character of All Saints', ever since its founding, All Saints' mission has engaged with education projects. Originally this was focused on the poor of the parish through the Edward Munro and his college for the 'scholars of Harrow Weald'. This progressed to the establishment of All Saints' School, on the site of the Blackwell Hall. Today, the Forest School continues this legacy, with its focus on the disadvantaged and needy young people in Harrow and beyond. This is good news. This is an out working of mission. Together with the pre-school, educational initiatives which serve the community will thrive. Celebrate them.

The number of children and families attending All Saints' has declined over the past eight years. Look after the families that remain and be sure to welcome and draw alongside new families who will arrive. Take risks in befriending new people. Beware of remaining in 'friendship silos'.

The church in England nationally, is going through a 'dark night of the soul'. Membership is in decline within the context of the UK's neoliberal culture and its insatiable consumer orientated demands on time and energy. Resources are increasingly scarce. This is the season the church is going through. Church life will continue to be challenging and increasingly uncertain and sometimes seemingly precarious. There is no short term fix to this. Do not let your new vicar be burdened with unrealistic expectations.

Stick with it. Stay faithful. This is what people of God have been called to do throughout their long and turbulent history, through good times and less good times.

Retain a willingness to critique and challenge the political consensus. Be distinct. Be angry, where appropriate. Love one another and be outrageously generous to each other and to strangers. Be cheerful. Feed the poor. Support the homeless.

Care for this beautiful place and be bold in imagining its future.

Take risks. As we have said many times, FAITH is spelt R.I.S.K.

Above all, know yourselves loved. Loved by God and always precious in his sight. In the face of challenge may the angel of All Saints' continue to be a blessing to the community of which the church is part. Look outwards, not inwards.

"...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you (into exile), and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Jeremiah 29:7

The letter to the Laodicean church ends with Jesus knocking at the door, awaiting to be invited in to their midst. That same Jesus is knocking at the door of All Saints' awaiting the invitation to shape and form the angel and lead you into new adventures which may be quite different from what you may have imagined. Listen for his knock.

Thank you for your friendship over the past eleven years and the adventures we have shared. All Saints' has been a good place to serve as vicar. The angel of the church has been kind and generous to us, especially through the challenges and uncertainties of the past year.

Thank you.

James

All Saints' Harrow Weald: Following Jesus - for the good of the world'