

## The Spiritual Realm



The Revelation to St. John the Divine 7:9 "I looked, and (behold) there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. (And) They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and (around) the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and (they) worshiped God."

For the last three weeks, our second Reading on Sunday morning has been from the Revelation to St. John the Divine --- and will be again for the next three weeks. In that book of Revelation, St. John has vision of heaven, one filled with a great number of mysterious images. There is that multitude too many to number, all robed in white with palm branches in their hands, standing with all the angels around the throne and around

the elders and around the four living creatures. There is also mention of the beast, and the enigmatic mark of the beast. There are the famous four horsemen, and the seven seals, and the seven trumpets sounding. And there is a dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns upon its heads. And there is described in some detail that great war in heaven, when St. Michael the Archangel finally cast the great dragon and his angels into hell.

Ah but alas, such talk of angels and demons and a war in heaven do not come easily to the lips of most Christians, especially Episcopalians. Most of us are uncomfortable, if not somewhat embarrassed, with such specific images of heavenly matters and spiritual warfare. Thus, different Christians address these concerns in different ways. To illustrate this point, I am reminded of a group of distinguished Christian writers, who just before the Second World War gathered weekly to read their works to one another in the backroom of the Eagle and Child Pub in Oxford. This group, dubbed by the press as 'the Inklings', included C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams. And in my mind, their popular novels reflect three different approaches to this discussion of the spiritual realm.

1) First there are Christians who do not believe that all this supernatural talk of angels and war in heaven is real. Let us call them the Christian Realists. Realists insist that we do not really know what happens when we die, or why bad things happen to good people sometimes. Yet they also acknowledge that

that kind of ignorance can be terribly frightening, so much so that individuals often attempt to fill in the void with all sorts of comforting ideas and images. The Realists recognize the legitimacy of such discussion, but only as objectified hopes and aspirations of our Christian understanding about the struggle of life, or as necessary elements in stories meant to excite the imagination to teach moral lessons. People can be inspired to do what is good and right, they admit, by preaching about angels and a war in heaven. For the fear of Hell is still a powerful motivational tool.

But the Realists are uncomfortable with much that spiritual realm involves and believe that most of this supernatural talk is a religious form of escapism. It is a way to explain the senseless pain and suffering of this world. For the poor and downtrodden are often comforted with the hopes of guardian angels to protect them or some heavenly rewards for their hard life, or sometimes with a bit of everlasting vengeance for their oppressors, that they may all burn in hell. But angels and demons are no more real, says the Realists, than the characters that inhabit enchanted forests or bewitched castles in fairy tales.

Realists view all this talk in much the same way as one might view J.R.R. Tolkien's wonderful world of the Lord of the Rings. You are no more likely to actually experience a real angel than one of Tolkien's hobbits. Such creatures are imaginative and psychological in origin. Such language is the language of

metaphor and parable; it may be morally instructive or spiritually inspiring, but it has no factual place in a realistic portrayal of life. It is ultimately fantasy.

2) Now the second group, we might call Christian Transcendentalists. Transcendentalists agree with the Realists that the spiritual realm is not really a part of this world, but they are reluctant to completely deny its ultimate reality. So, the Transcendentalists insist that the spiritual realm really does exist but on a different plane somewhere, just not here. People on earth may catch glimpses of heavenly beings from time to time, but they exist in another sphere than ours, they live in another world somewhere else. We might compare this approach to that of C.S. Lewis in the Narnia Chronicles. For Narnia is meant to be a very real place. It is not to be perceived simply as the objectified hopes or psychotic delusions of the characters in the story. But nor is it a part of this world. You have to leave this world behind to get there, in Lewis' story you have to go through the wardrobe to reach Narnia.

And there are sometimes momentous occasions or places where the spiritual world touches this one, where God enters our human history, if only for a brief moment, like with Moses on Mount Sinai, or the vision of angels at our death bed, or with the Resurrection appearances. But such occasions are not only special; they are also very rare. They are unexpected glimpses

into another world. And for most of us the spiritual realm plays no immediate part in our lives, until we die.

3) A third approach is taken by what I call Christian Immanists. Like the Transcendentalists, they firmly believe in the real existence of the spiritual world, but unlike them, they do not believe it exists somewhere else, somewhere through the wardrobe and the looking glass. Rather for the Immanists, the spiritual realm is here and now, intermeshed and interacting with this physical world of ours. For them, the spiritual realm is very much a dimension of this life.

The author Charles Williams portrays this kind of thinking in his books, so much so that his novels are not usually found in the regular fiction section of bookstores, but on the science fiction shelf. In his stories very ordinary scenes take on extraordinary importance, not because of some rare intervention or glimpse of the spiritual realm in our world, but because of a simple revelation, because the reader begins to see what was always there underpinning the world. The division between the two realms fades in Williams' books. You sometimes cannot tell who is alive and who is dead in his stories, or what is natural and what is supernatural. There are no isolated incidents of miraculous happenings, for all of life suddenly becomes miraculous in itself. That is the beauty and the excitement of a William's novel, but that also makes it a bit bizarre and unreal sounding to many readers, belonging more to fantasy and science fiction

than reality. Williams, however, meant it to be taken seriously, and it is by many, but interestingly he is the least popular and least well-known of these three writers.

So then, which one of these three approaches to the questions about spiritual realities is the right one? Which one is true? Which one should a Christian believe? In one sense, I think, they all are true. For all three approaches value the language and ideas of the spiritual realm. All three approaches find such language and concepts useful to articulate some aspect of our common human experience, whether it is our aspirations, or our fears, or the incarnational moments of our life, or a suspected hidden element of mystery in our everyday living. The language of the spiritual realm is a useful language to express a part of our life that is rarely discussed otherwise, and for which other language often fails to grasp.

The real danger, I think, lies in a fourth approach to these concerns and such talk of the spiritual realm, and that is simply not to speak of it at all. And this is perhaps the most common approach, even among Christians. And I fear that in this scientific age of ours we will lose complete touch with the spiritual realm; that we will forget how to speak that language in any meaningful fashion, and that we will exorcise all those uncomfortable, sometimes embarrassing, and doubtful images from our religious discourse, and that we will be less for it. We will remove all mystery and supernatural wonder, and create a sort of

de-caffeinated version of Christianity, taking out those images and concepts we don't like or need, or that we find embarrassing, or impossible to comprehend.

But alas there is mystery in life, that we often don't know as much as we think we do. For there is more to life than meets the eye. And there is also real evil out there. Reality is not limited by what we consciously experience in our lives or how much of our lives we actually comprehend. Williams may be right, there may be another world out there in the streets and we may be a part of it whether we want to be or not, and whether we realize it or not. Let us at least be willing to speak of it. AMEN.