

Wendy's First 10:30

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 30 September 2018 by the Associate Vicar, the Revd. Wendy Wales, in Beverley Minster.

Were I still a Chaplain in Oxford, this week would be 0th week- the start of Michaelmas Term. Michaelmas. The Mass of St Michael and All Angels- celebrated yesterday in the Christian Calendar.

And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

I'm not still a Chaplain in Oxford- I'm here in Beverley as the Minster's brand new associate and pioneer minister- and I **was** really excited about this, especially because everyone has been so incredibly welcoming- both to me but also my husband Tom and cockapoo Jonah, who is already excited about the pet service at Molescroft next Sunday!

You may have noticed the fact I said I 'was' excited about this.....well, one of the things I was most looking forward to was working with Jonathan (the vicar) and Robert (the director of music). I thought they were both really talented, wise, kind, welcoming leaders....but then this morning happens.

My first talk at the 10.30am service. Everyone will be wondering what theological gems I can produce. You will all be assessing my Biblical perspectives, deciding if I'm funny/ engaging/ deep/ light/ wise/ sensitive/ exegetical/ applied enough- my one and only moment to make a good first impression.

Robert tells me the choir are singing an anthem for Michaelmas- so I have to talk about dragons.

Jonathan gave me the Lectionary readings that include images of hell and chopping off of limbs.

That's 10 minutes to cover Satan, Hell, Dragons, Demons, Evil, Spiritual Battles and eternal fire. Backed up with the Israelites moaning about their dinner.

Thank you.....I've booked onto the 2pm train back down South!

Humour aside- these are huge issues and all worth exploring in great depth, but given the limitation on my time and capacity this morning, I want to take a step back and consider a broader perspective, focusing on how we can respond to the dragons we encounter today.

Tolkein said: *"It simply isn't an adventure worth telling if there are no dragons"* and those of you who are fans of Lord of the Rings, Game of Thrones or Harry Potter will no doubt agree. Life is full of dragons- and the fact that Satan or evil is described as a serpent or dragon in the book of Revelation should come as no surprise.

The Bible is packed full of ways to explain the presence of evil, darkness, and hell in our world - I have no doubt that every one us here will have had experiences in our own lives and in the lives of those we love and those we hear about around the globe that demonstrate these images as lived realities.

Unlike epic fantasy narratives, the darkness and evil we experience day-to-day is generally far less glamorous and the ends don't always tie neatly together in a glorious dramatic triumphant conclusion.

I don't want to dwell here this morning but we've all lost friends to cancer, we know that countless children die of malnutrition and lack of clean water or basic health care. We've lost loved ones too young.

I have a friend who works with victims of sexual violence in war zones- she believes she's experienced living hell on earth. Many of us will know the fire that consume our heads, hearts and emotions when relationships break down and love turns to pain .

Who can stand to hear the stories unfold from the 'Me too Campaign', from the latest child abuse horror or from our own painful memories.

During my time as a chaplain, I spent significant time in the psychiatric unit with those whose mental health had covered them with the deepest of darkness. How many of us here will know the battles with depression or anxiety, the onset of dementia or the ravages of an eating disorder.

The demons and dragons and darkness still need defeating.

Jesus came to banish the darkness, to set the prisoners free, bring sight to the blind, good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, healing to the sick....his kingdom shines light in the darkness, defeats evil and restores earth to the place of peace, healing and wholeness that it was intended to be.

His teaching and parables make it clear that this won't be easy- and that we are all invited to play our part. The reading that we didn't hear this morning is from the book of James where we are exhorted to back up our actions with prayer.

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them. Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed...

Prayer: not a wishful thinking displacement activity, but the fuel of the kingdom, the power of God at work in lives and hearts, the force that fights evil most powerfully and decisively. As we pray, we confront the darkness in our own hearts and lives and share Jesus' kingdom adventure.

I love the vision of the Minster here in Beverley to be a sanctuary for all those who come into it- so that we can take sanctuary out into the world where it's needed. I'm excited that I have a role here in the nerve centre of prayer and worship as well as the mandate to take this good news beyond these walls.

This is the mandate for each one of us here who knows and follows Jesus.

We come to pray together, to worship together, to break bread and drink wine together, to receive prayer and to pray for the needs of the world. We meet in myriads of different groups- from the choir to the ramblers, the family day crew or the Mother's Union, the Youth group or the Minster staff and volunteers....

We leave here to our daily contexts- our schools, homes, shops, clubs, societies, sports fields and places of work.

Where we find dragons and darkness, pain or sorrow- we can be people of prayer, of hope, of transformation as we demonstrate the compassion, love and healing that we have found in Jesus.

After the service today there is an opportunity to discover how you can be more involved in making the Minster a place of Sanctuary for everyone, at the volunteer fair- I'm excited to see just how many wonderful things are going on.

It's easy to be an Israelite and moan about the things we don't like, the changes or the lack of change.... you may look back and remember the cucumbers and onions, the good old days....you may feel your strength is dried up, you might be bored of the manna- but just maybe, God is calling you to be part of the solution- to leave the wilderness and join the prophets in bringing in something new....old age appears to be no barrier in God's way of doing things!

But I also invite you to pray that this week God will show you afresh how you can be God's kingdom people in the world as you leave this place and that where you struggle with dragons you will know the presence of God with you and the power of God setting you free.