Well it’s finally decided. After months of debate and argument and ideological fighting, Ed Milliband is the newly victorious leader of the Labour party.

They didn’t do it alone of course. Each candidate had huge numbers of supporters and workers and their lobbying was fierce. It was a real contest not a coronation – a hard fought battle,

But the names that counted were the brothers Ed and David.

There are some similarities to be drawn with the themes of our patronal festival.

Our New Testament reading from Revelation is always likely to be misunderstood. As apocalyptic literature, it is not to be interpreted literally but rather, like an impressionist painting, it portrays reality in an unusual light.

**The first reality that comes through is the reality of spiritual battle –**

v7 - “And war broke out in heaven”

The bible does not shrink from recognising the fight between good and evil, between those on God’s side and those against.

We do well to remember that we are involved in a war – as vicious and grim as our forces are facing in Afghanistan; spiritual yes but no less real for that.

Christianity is not a hobby; nor is it simply a philosophy or set of ethical ideas;
It is a relationship with Jesus Christ that involves signing up for his cause, enlisting in his army.
Like any commanding officer, he requires us to be obedient to him in the struggles of life.
That will inevitably bring us into conflict with those opposed to Christianity.

The two armies here are numerous but we know only the names of their leaders – Michael and Lucifer. In a sense they too are brothers.
They are both creatures; both angels.

Michael only gets a few mentions in Scripture.

The Hebrew name “mik ai el” means “Who is like God?”
He is the leader of the heavenly hosts. Indeed they are called “his angels” v7. In Jude, he is referred to as “Archangel”

According to Daniel 10v21, he is the heavenly champion of Israel.

Traditionally, Michael has been associated with the tops of mountains and hills. Our Cathedral is on a hill top. Michaelmas as St Michael’s day is also known, is often one of the dates used for ordination. I myself was ordained this day in 1981.

But though Michael himself is only mentioned a few times. There are numerous references to angels in the Bible. They are God’s messengers and are busy all the time doing his will, protecting and helping his people.
There have been times when the church has got too wrapped up with angels. The letter to the Hebrews was written partly to correct that – and later there was much debate about how many angels could stand on a pinhead. Ridiculous but our danger is to ignorance and disbelief.

How good that in what the Pope calls “our aggressively secular society”, our great West Screen and Gethsemane chapel underline the work and ministry of angels.

How good to have in the centre of this great city, Epstein’s portrayal of the victory of Michael over Lucifer.

The leader on the other side, the side of evil has more names and references. Lucifer – “angel of light” is also called “great dragon”, “ancient serpent” “the Devil” and “Satan” – v9

It seems that this angel fell to the sin of pride and thinking too highly of himself, led a rebellion against God.

Two things about him that are revealed in this passage

1. He is a deceiver; indeed v9, he is the “deceiver of the whole world”

Jesus himself said of the devil in John 8v44

“When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies”

Jesus had experienced his lies himself – even misquoting the Bible to him during the temptation.

He will try and deceive us too, lying about others to us, lying about our standing before God, lying about what is important and what is not.

How is he trying to deceive you at the moment?
Through slandering a fellow Christian?
By telling you your sin doesn’t matter?
By pretending that the gospel has no power to change lives.

Let’s remind ourselves of truth.
Jesus is the name by which any may be saved and are being saved – all over the world from every tribe and nation.

How good today to be rejoicing in our widening circle of Friends of the Cathedral and their AGM.
How good today to be remembering our community of the Cross of nails, to have welcomed friends from Eastern Europe and Russia last week, to have with us today friends from Germany and the United States.
Yesterday, I was praying with leaders of churches from the African and Asian churches in Coventry.

Jesus army is growing.
Revelation tells us it is beyond numbering and made up of people from every tribe and nation. Hallelujah!

2. The other truth about the Devil shown here is that he is defeated – v8-10

This is a vital truth to hold on to.

Part of his deception is to pretend that he is not defeated; that he can win.
But as our reading makes clear, he has been conquered – though he is still active – v12 “But woe to the earth and the sea for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short”

As with all analogies, the comparison with the Milliband brothers breaks down here.

I am not portraying David as the Devil.
All members of the Labour party will hope that the brothers and their different supporters now work together for the good of the party and the country.

No such hope is available for Michael and the devil. The spiritual battle is fierce and to the end but at that end, the forces of evil are definitely, finally and forever defeated.

**By contrast, the forces of good are victorious – v11.**

In the short term, they may be persecuted even martyrred – v11
“for they did not cling to life even in the face of death”

We cannot expect a smooth and easy life. The battle still rages and we are not immune to suffering or death
But we are assured ultimate victory not because of our strength or wisdom but because of the blood of the lamb (v11), because of the death of Jesus for us.

And therefore the word of testimony is powerful v11

As we approach our “Come and See” week of outreach in October, we can expect to be made particularly aware of the reality of the spiritual battle.

The Enemy hates nothing more than Christians sharing their faith with others. He will try everything to stop it – condemning, accusing, lying – anything to try and make us keep our testimony quiet.

As we come to Holy Communion this morning, let’s rejoice in the cup of victory, the blood of the lamb and let’s determine to share our testimony with many whilst we and they have time.

© 2010 John Irvine