‘You ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation’ (Revelation 5.9)

When you walk up St Michael’s Steps past Epstein’s great representation of the archangel and the Devil, and when we listen to passages of the Bible like the ones we have heard this afternoon we enter a dangerous world, where it is important to keep our sanity. Because Daniel and Revelation take us into the world of vision and apocalypse which has been a playground of fantasists and sectarians, some of them megalomaniacs eager to lead others into their own illusions of persecution and personal grandeur. Think of David Koresh and the Branch Davidian sect who died at Waco, Texas in 1993. But Daniel and Revelation have also been areas of hope and encouragement to those suffering genuine persecution and inhuman cruelty. Books like Daniel and Revelation, puzzling as they are, are invaluable witnesses, reminders of the powerful presence of another unseen world pressing in upon the one we can see and touch. The angel touches Daniel to restore his strength when the terror of seeing him had thrown Daniel to the ground. It is quite clear from our two readings that the angels of the Bible are not pink fluffy feminine figures, but awesome, terrifying beings who shatter the confidence of the strongest and most stable people. This world of angelic beings is real, more real than the one we live in but it is not normally present to us; so much so that many of our contemporaries will deny its very existence. The poet Wendy Cope is quoted in the current Third Way magazine as saying I love Jesus, I think that being a Christian is a good way to live, I think that Christians do an awful lot of good in the world; I just don’t believe in the supernatural bits and life after death – which seems to me to be fairly crucial. Crucial indeed, because of course the ‘supernatural bits’ have to include God himself, so Wendy Cope has to describe herself as an ‘Anglican agnostic’.

Well, let’s be proper, full-blooded Anglicans: what are these passages telling us? Daniel is chosen for this Michaelmas festival as the one Old Testament book in which the Archangel Michael appears – and he only has a walk-on part in the book of Revelation. In Daniel he is described as the ‘prince’ or guardian angel of the people of Israel. The Greek Orthodox with their enthusiasm for saints and angels sometimes say to us ‘your Protestant heaven is empty!’ Not so, look at the West Screen with its saints and angels behind you. In the first verses of Daniel 10 it says a word was revealed to Daniel... The word was true, and it concerned a great conflict. Now the Bible is a record of the conflict which entered the world the moment the first people set aside the commandment of God to make their own judgements. Conflict, in other words, is endemic to human life. So God has a dispute with humanity which is played out in the story of the people of Israel and the prophets sent to them. In times of great political turmoil Jewish thinkers often anticipated a huge final conflict in which God’s overwhelming power would be conclusively victorious, all resistance to his ways would cease and his Kingdom would come. This is the theme of the last three chapters of the book of Daniel as it is the theme of the book of Revelation. In times of great stress people naturally turn to these parts of the Bible for reassurance that God is ultimately in control and his will will be done.

How can we know that? Because of that great Experiment in which God entered human life himself in the person of Jesus and made the decisive move in the resolution of the conflict. God recruited humanity itself in the work of its own rescue. From Mary’s Yes to the angel of the Annunciation to the stunned Saul on the road to Damascus asking ‘Who are you, Lord?’, God demonstrated his incomparable capacity to bring peace and reconciliation out of the mess human beings have made of the life given them. In the imagery of our second lesson from Revelation chapter 5, no-one has the authority to open the mysterious sacred scroll, except one described as the Lion of the tribe of Judah. But if John the Seer, the author of Revelation then expected a Lion to appear, what he saw was a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered. The way of the Lord is the way of the suffering servant, as Paul had to learn by hearing the voice of Jesus say Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? We live between the times of God’s great initiative in Jesus and his final reckoning with his whole creation, so we live by the Spirit of Jesus, the suffering servant and resurrected Lord.
The way of the Spirit of the Lord is not revenge but reconciliation, as this Cathedral and its community has proclaimed over 50 years, striving to be Reconciling People. Last Sunday I met a German priest from Dresden who was visiting our church in Wellesbourne as part of preparing himself to take on new ecumenical responsibilities in his area. I mentioned my link with the Cathedral and his face immediately lit up. ‘Ah, Coventry Cathedral!’ he said, and struggled to say in broken English what this Cathedral meant to him. We are coming to a time of jubilee for the Cathedral, a time of wonder and a time of thanksgiving for all that has been done here in the last 50 years. As those of us involved with the book Reconciling People have said to each other, this is not a time for self-congratulation and warm anecdotes, but a time of thankfulness and a time of careful and honest and positive reflection on these years, weighing up what was done, what might have been done and what couldn’t be done.

Above all it is a time to reflect on what it has meant, does mean and will mean to be a Reconciling People. This means first and foremost to be a Reconciled People, reconciled to God through Christ, knowing how our weakness and inadequacy and perversity is covered up and made good in the grace of the Lord. Only so are we enabled to call others both to be reconciled to God and to be reconciled to one another, to be peacemakers who know the final reality of peace, while deeply conscious of the persistent reality of human conflict and the ever-present grounds for further conflict.

Let me risk trying to be prophetic. In the early 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Empire there were those who talked of the End of History, in the sense that there was now no alternative but the Western democratic capitalist model. Sooner or later all nations would become like the West, it was thought. Almost immediately others set about proving that wrong, and we plunged into a series of wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Iraq and Afghanistan again. In the last few years we have begun to ask whether the very way of life we have been fighting to defend is itself actually sustainable. Suspicion grows that our financial institutions are inherently unstable, and even more alarming that our planet cannot provide enough resources for us to go on living as we have been. Even less can the planet provide for the populations of China and India to live at our levels of extravagance. Yet who are we to tell them that?

I worry for my grand-children, and I am frankly glad that I won’t have to face what they may have to face as they grow towards my age. But my hope is in what makes us a Reconciling People; my hope is in the wild-eyed prophets of Daniel and Revelation. Revelation chapter 5 celebrates saints from every tribe and language and people and nation. That means that all of us here, whatever our talents, whatever our personal story, we are recruited into the reconciling work of God, and each one of us is called to discern where and how God is leading him or her to the tasks of peace-making and bearing the Good News of God’s love for his world, whether it is as the vicar of Baghdad or the one who tries to mend a family quarrel. In the words of Paul: God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. Here is the answer to what seems to be unending conflict in the world, that God has drawn from all nations and all communities those who will respond to the sacrificial message of Jesus the Lamb of God — the message that the resigned acceptance of permanent war must give way to the conviction that peace-making is possible; that the resort to force must be replaced by the will to reconcile; that despair for the future must be dissolved by hope in the God who cares for all his creation, and has given himself for its rescue.