

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Sep 29th 2015

Feast of Saints Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, archangels

Humans communicate their thoughts and feelings for one another in various media that we talk about as symbolic. Words, pictures, gestures, expressions and all kinds of things serve to express love and hate, reasoned thought and angry diatribe and every possible intended and unintended message of one person to another. In many ways these symbolic interactions are so ordinary that we don't spend time reflecting on them as symbol, drawing distinctions between "signs" that point to basic information that we need or want and symbols which are much richer and more layered in meaning because they don't just point, they participate in what they identify. Music "causes" us to have feelings that the composer and, often, the performer(s) intend us to have. Similarly, scholars evoke thoughts (and often feelings as well) from those who study their works because their words or formulae express the thoughts and feelings of the original communicator.

For Christians this notion of the participatory character of symbol is at the heart of the mystery of the Incarnation. God chooses to communicate the essence of God's self: Divine thoughts, intentions, will, affections and all aspects of the Divine that can be received by humans through the wide range of media that we can perceive and make meaning from. Thus the symbolic or sacramental character of faith is central to understanding and receiving what God desires for us and from us.

I point to all this as a way of introducing the mysterious Feast that we celebrate today of the Archangels. Those mysterious creatures identified in the Bible as messengers of God's plan and presence to humans in various ways. The Scriptures today focus on God made present in power and glory in human manifestation. The Gospel, which is a call passage from John's first chapter, witnesses that the very human Jesus reads human hearts (a divine attribute) and then promises that he can do far greater things.

If we focus on the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Daniel, we understand that the Church is wants us to appreciate the angels as expressions (symbols) of the immense power and glory of the messianic figure of the "Son of Man." Early Christians knew, after Jesus' resurrection that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy of Daniel.

In other biblical texts, the angelic figures of Michael, Raphael and Gabriel are presented as immensely powerful messengers of God's protection (Michael), communication of the Divine plan (Gabriel), and revelatory healing (Raphael). The various aspects of speed, power, and authority are communicated through a number of symbolic media (wings, war gear, size, multiple eyes, trumpets etc.). The words and ancient poetic style of the text depicting good and evil can overwhelm modern

understanding, but one wonderful way to enter the text that we are now privileged to enjoy here on campus at Creighton is through pondering the pages of the Heritage Edition of the St. John's Bible.



Vision of the Son of Man Ancient manuscript work – visual artistry, iconography and beautiful calligraphy was understood in the Christian Monastic tradition as early as the 4th Century to be a form of sacrament that enabled humans to receive (understand and believe) the scriptural word of God. This great art/word form of communication has been brought magnificently into the 21st Century by world renowned calligrapher, Donald Jackson and a number of collaborating artists and calligraphers in the

hand calligraphed and illustrated St. John's Bible – sponsored by St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, MN. The illustration that accompanies today's first reading is stunning, and it offers the reader/viewer opportunity to let symbols of word and art transform our reception of the Word of God.

As we gaze at the artwork delineating the text in symbolic colors and follow the patterns of embossed gold (identifying the presence of God) the words and art find a home in our heart and our understanding that goes beyond merely pointing to the experience – it allows us to participate in the experience of the angels – who stand in awe and wonder in God's Presence both to worship and to accomplish God's mission- just what we, the Church are called to do with our lives in this world. Thus do symbols transform us if we are but willing to give engage them with our minds and hearts.

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