We tend to think of English geography in terms of a north/south divide: the frozen north where people take a bath and strut their stuff; and the warm south, whose inhabitants have a bath and find it funny that bears like honey. But to my mind almost as significant is the east/west distinction. Of my two score years and eight, I’ve spent forty living in the west half of the country and only seven in the east; and I find it hard not to think of my two eastern sojourns, one in Cambridge, the other a whole twelve miles further east in Newmarket, as times of exile. By contrast six years in Lancashire felt much more like a spell on home turf. It’s hard to say exactly where this east west difference lies - it’s a mixture of climate and culture and geography – but I think the key to it is up in the sky. Noel Coward’s ‘very flat, Norfolk’ may not be entirely accurate, but it’s certainly true of Cambridgeshire and most of Lincolnshire. Westerners, marooned in the flatlands of the east and pining for the undulations of home, need to lift up their eyes – not to the hills because there aren’t any! – but to the sky, to which those splendid lighthouse churches point:

What would you be, you wide East Anglian sky,
Without church towers to recognise you by?

wrote Betjeman.

In that sense the inhabitants of eastern England are well placed to understand the worldview of the Bible and its authors. People in the ancient world were far more attuned to the sky than we are: they were always looking up, expectant of revelation from above. ‘The sky’, as Joseph Mangina has written, ‘was seen as an intelligible reality, to be scrutinized for the light it shed on human destiny or even the affairs of the gods’ (Revelation, p.147). And if that’s true of the ancient world in general, shorn of its pagan
resonance it’s also true of the biblical writers. Most famous are Matthew’s wise men: ‘we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him’ (Matthew 2:2); but also the prophets, especially Joel and Daniel; and Jesus himself, ‘the Son of Man, coming in clouds and great glory’ (Mark 13:26).

Both scripture readings this morning point us to the skies. First we heard from Isaiah, directing our gaze ‘to the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens’. The passage we heard is what is known as a royal oracle, a literary form common to the ancient near East. Its primary purpose is to proclaim the shocking, unprecedented news, that the Lord God has chosen Cyrus, Gentile Persian King, to be his anointed. The way in which the prophet makes this divine announcement is designed to reinforce its novelty: practically the whole range of the terminology by which God’s relationship to his Jewish people has hitherto been described, is here applied to Cyrus: first and most unprecedentedly, Cyrus is the Lord’s anointed; but he is also ‘my shepherd who will carry out my purpose’, whose right hand is held by the Lord, who is called by name, who is given a surname of honour, who is armed and girded by the Lord.

And, though, these words are uttered through the mouth of the prophet, the passage could scarcely be clearer in claiming that the prophet here is simply the Lord’s mouthpiece. Often the prophets paraphrase God’s words or illustrate them with symbolic actions. Here by contrast, they are uttered plainly. Eight times in the passage the unutterable divine name, YHWH, is referenced; 17 times the divine pronoun ‘I’ – ‘I am that I am’, the one who spoke to Moses on Horeb – prefaces the utterance. I am the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens’. It is this God, the Creator of all, who has chosen Cyrus, King of Persia, as his instrument. Salvation, coming from this most unlikely quarter is proclaimed from above, from the skies:

Shower, O heavens, from above,
and let the skies rain down righteousness;
…I the LORD have created it.

When we turn to our second reading, from the Revelation to St John, again we are still called to look upward, but here the picture is less monolithic. If Isaiah offers us a monologue by the voice of the Lord, Revelation offers a company of voices and agents proclaiming God’s word: first the woman clothed with the sun; then Michael and his angels, at war with the ancient serpent. Not God alone then here, but God in Christ, in the company of his mother and of the saints.
We may wonder why it is Michael who wins the victory over Satan. Does Christ, does God, really require angelic assistance to do his work? Reflecting on this question in a sermon, the great Reformation theologian, Heinrich Bullinger, reminded his hearers that, though Christ is the head and sole cause of the triumph of good over evil, he does not act alone

Christ [is] the head of his church, king and protector with his members, apostles, martyrs, and faithful. Neither is it a rare thing, that Christ should be figured to us by angels: but is even most accustomed, that angels are called the ambassadors of God, and the faithful servants of Jesus Christ.

Christ therefore head of the church and the faithful members of Christ, fight against the dragon, yet after a diverse sort. For Christ overcame him alone in the combat without help of any creature, whilst in the temptations he discomfited him at the last, and also by dying on the cross and rising again from the dead, he also brake his head.

This is the only, true, and singular victory: whereby afterwards are obtained the victories of Christ’s members, gotten of that general fight wherein Christ figheth not now only hand to hand with the devil, but all the members of Christ at all times under Christ their captain fight against the devil, and in the virtue or victory of Christ, fight and overcome

[cit, Mangina, Revelation, pp.153-4]

What Bullinger expressed in words, we here in Christ Church have set above us day by day in Clayton and Bell’s great north transept window: the members of Christ at all times under Christ their captain… fight and overcome’.

I began by saying that it’s easier to raise one’s eyes heavenwards in the eastern counties of our country with their expansive skies, the fingerposts of spires and towers directing the eyes upwards. But of course wherever we are we can look upwards – and spiritually, as well perhaps as literally, that is what worship is all about. Lift up your hearts, says the priest at the opening of the Eucharistic prayer; but with our hearts we should lift our eyes too.

Oxford is a western city, ringed by hills. But there in one part of our city, a part I have become intensely familiar with in recent years, where the sky is dominant. All of us passed through it on our way here this morning: I’m thinking, of course, of Tom Quad. That great architectural set piece is it seems to me, almost above all else, a picture frame
for the sky above it: the clouds, the sun, herons and hot air balloons by day; Venus, mercury, the European space station, the myriad constellations by night; all are seen more clearly here than anywhere else. One day last week the sinister black flying wing of a B2 Stealth Bomber of the USAF passed over the quad. It felt very much like a sign and a portent: at nearly $2 billion per plane this is the world’s most expensive and most deadly aircraft, at once the acme of human technology and a sign of how fallen we are. The beautiful human handiwork of Tom Quad, framing the yet more beautiful divine handiwork of the sky above, but shadowed by this jagged instrument of human violence.

Each time we gather for worship God calls us to raise our eyes from our preoccupations: to raise our eyes both to the Word spoken in the readings and to the way that Word addresses the needs, the threats, the challenges, the realities of the world. The liturgy, like the Quad we pass through to reach it, gathers us and sends us out, framing our focus so that we may see more clearly, follow more nearly and love more dearly the one who fought and overcame and, who through us and in us, fights still and will overcome.

In nomine…