

Sunday 29 September 2024
Michael and All Angels

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Revelation 12. 7-12

NT: Hebrews 1. 5-end

Gp: John 1. 47-end

Angels have been, for millennia, in scriptures and myths, hearts and minds, an expression of human aspiration, hope, and expectation, an in-built instinct to engage not only with invisible worlds, but with invisible beings too, as a way of relieving anxiety about living, and about the inevitability of death. Angels speak of and to something all too real and all too urgent in the human experience.

Words taken from Peter Stanford's book, *Angels* and whether you agree with him or not, it cannot be denied that angels litter the Bible. From their first appearance in the very first book, Genesis, where they are set as guards at Heaven's gate when Adam and Eve are expelled to the final book, Revelations where we have the story from today's reading of Michael defeating Satan. It was an angel, Gabriel, who announced that Jesus, the Messiah, was to be born of Mary. It was angels who then announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds and angels who told of his resurrection to the women at the tomb in the garden.

There is supposedly a hierarchy of angels too with cherubim who guard against sin and who watch over the Ark of the Covenant. There are the six-winged seraphim who praise God night and day. Then come the messengers of God, the Archangels including Michael, Gabriel and Raphael whose appearance is in the Book of Tobit where he is sent by God to test the faith of Tobit and his family. According to Raphael he is *one of the seven angels who stand ready and enter before the glory of the Lord*. The other four are not mentioned by name in the Bible so I'll leave you to do your own research on their names and I also recommend a read of the Books of Tobit. It's a good story and one seldom told in the church's lectionary.

Whatever your level of scepticism, it is hard to denounce the existence of angels, they are ubiquitous in all three of the major faiths including Christianity. They are there in music, in art and in literature. Angels have become an essential part of the human experience. I was brought up to believe that each one of us has a guardian angel who is tireless in watching over us. Whether this is true or not, it gives a sense of comfort and consolation, a certain reminder that God is on our side, no matter the suffering and difficulties we face. This is reflected in the story of the Angels of Mons in the First World War, another subject for your research this week!

So angels are a symbol of God's love and kindness, his companionship with us in our exile in this world until we take our place in his eternal glory in heaven. If it was angels who guarded the gates of paradise to stop Adam and Eve returning, it was angels that went with them until their sins were forgiven and they could return.

Angels too are God's messengers as we have seen them bringing the news to Mary that she was to be the Mother of God, appearing to Zechariah to announce that despite their old age, he and his wife Elizabeth would have son, John the Baptist who would be called to prepare the way for the Messiah. An angel was present in Joseph's dreams more than once, telling him to take Mary as his wife and then later to flee to Egypt with his young family.

When God wants to make clear his purpose and his plan, he sends an angel, he spells it out for humanity because after all, God's ways are not our ways and we lack the imagination to see just what God can achieve for the sake of our salvation. No one would have believed that an ignominious death on a cross could set free humanity from the vice grip of sin.

Finally, at the will of God, angels can freely pass between heaven and earth. Somehow they act as a gateway where earth meets heaven and heaven meets earth. Remember Jacob's Ladder and his dream of angels ascending and descending. When Jacob woke he said: *Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!* And he was afraid, and said, *'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.* This same vision is reflected in today's gospel reading, just as the Promise Land was suddenly revealed to Jacob, so Nathaniel, who was cynical about the true nature of Jesus, saying: *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* (He'd not met Fr Yazid!)

So suddenly Nathaniel comes to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus responds with an image that any good Jew would know, Jacob's Ladder, and he says: *Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'* But now it's not just about the Promise Land but the promise of eternal salvation to be accomplished through Jesus, the Son of Man. We have moved from the Old to the New Covenant.

So the angels are an important part of God's creation with vital roles to play but as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews wishes to convey, they have their place as servants of God but we are God's children, the inheritors of the promise of eternal life. *Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*

It is worth reflecting again on the place of angels in our lives, their role as another gift of God to support and watch over us. Or a means of God to test our faith and our commitment to the two great commandments to love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength. And to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Angels are not always obvious to spot, they may not appear with wings and innocent faces. It is good to be mindful of their possible presence among us, as George Eliot says in her work, *Scenes of Clerical Life: The golden moments in the stream of life rush past us, and we see nothing but sand; the angels come to visit us, and we only know them when they are gone.*

Or as the writer to the Hebrews says: *Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

Revd Michelle Montrose