

SERMON FOR ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS | 29.09.2019

Genesis 28: 10-17; Revelation 12: 7-12; St John 1: 47-51



I chose this picture, by the 19th century French artists **William-Aldolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905)** for the **First Communicants** last week. It was the first in a twenty image sequence of pictures showing the life of Christ – from his nativity to his **Ascension**.

As with all pictures, the artist makes us think about rather more than just the bit of the story being depicted. Called **'The Song of the Angels'** and painted in 1881, we have a typical Christmas card image, the sleeping child in the arms of his mother – being serenaded by violin and lute playing angels.

The Feast of **St Michael and all Angels, Michaelmass**, may not be a familiar part of our Christian experience these days: by and large even the great holy days in our calendar like **Ascension Day** and even **Pentecost**, barely catch our attention unless we make something of it – like the sending off of a balloon over the trees of **Prebend Street** at **Ascension** or the wearing of red at **Pentecost**. But these holy days are there, strung out throughout the year, to give us a peg to hang ideas on. The Christian year is a valuable vehicle for rehearsing and reminding us of the great truths we believe and **St Michael and All Angels** is one such. So today – **Angels, Truth and Charity ...** Let's start with angels.

For 21st century rationalists, the idea of angels might seem a bit fanciful – the stuff of Christmas cards and children’s poems. We would be surprised how much time and effort several big names in the Early Church spent describing the various layers of non-bodily beings that barely appear in the Bible but do emerge from the pages of rather more obscure (almost Scriptural) books like Enoch. The rather strange Book of Daniel, which of course is in the Old Testament, has a couple of references of St Michael; there is a brief mention in Jude and of course there is the famous one which is in our second reading, from the Book of Revelation – sometimes known as the Book of the Apocalypse, the vision of the end times. But that is all.

Far more importantly, though is the fact that Jesus talked about the angels as living realities. And they occur in his story at various crucial moments: at the time when Mary is told that she is to become his mother, at his birth, after his time of Temptation in the desert and again when he is in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus recalls that they would have been ready to defend him at his arrest – and finally it is two angels who tell the disciples that the tomb is empty because Jesus has risen from the dead. So before we dismiss them as just fiction and fanciful, we have to accept they were an integral part of Jesus’ experience.

But what might we expect to learn from St Michael and all angels today? Do angels still have a part to play in our faith? Remember those lines from Hamlet, *there here are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy*. Could it be that the value of angels lies in the notion that we can’t reject things just because we can’t see them? As in science, most of creation is invisible.

Second, when the great prophet Isaiah is taken up in the middle of a crisis and he sees heaven in all its glory – or as in Daniel, when he is exhausted after his wrestling in the desert – what they are shown in visions is a new world, a world where God is not just an idea (one idea among many indeed - trying to capture our attention) but THE idea, the one in glory who is constantly worshipped and adored in heaven. Just for a moment Isaiah and Daniel are given the privilege of seeing Heaven. And what do they see? The great throng of angels who pray night and day in that place.

As we say at every Mass: *And therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name, forever praising you and saying: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might; heaven and earth are filled with your glory. Hosanna in the highest.*

So the biblical visions are attempts to reveal what is happening 24/7 in heaven. And because they are so overwhelming, as with Isaiah and Daniel we are minded to say in the words of our Eucharistic Prayer: *and we thank you, Lord, for counting us worthy to stand in your presence to serve you...* These stories about angels are cogent reminders of the fact that they are praying even when we aren't (or won't).

And third, as in Jesus' experience, the angels have been said to have a wonderfully consoling ministry too. Throughout 2000 years of Christian history people have spoken of the reassurance they have felt that they had a Guardian angel, guarding and protecting them against what St Peter says is *the prowling devil, stalking around, seeing whom he may devour*. Prayers may well end *and may the Angels of God guard and protect us, this night and for evermore*.

I have to say, though, that anything more than a vague, tacit belief in angels may be a bridge too far for many. Yes, Hamlet is absolutely right that *there are more things in heaven and earth than we know about* and I am very open to the idea of spirits and other phenomena floating around without my knowledge or awareness. Indeed I have often been asked to bless rooms and even whole houses where people have felt the presence of ghosts and sometimes quite malevolent 'presences'. In a wonderful way prayer has often seemed to make those places seem right and at peace again afterwards. Yet how it happens and why it happens sometimes and not others, about those things I have absolutely no idea: that is God's business and I leave it to him.

And the same may said about a literal reading of the Book of Revelation. Whether there will be the kinds of cosmic wars and the slaying of dragons, pools of blood and St Michael on the war path at the end of time, I have no idea. It all sounds a bit like *Star Wars* to me.

To be honest I rest more happily in the bigger picture: that the Holy Spirit is constantly at work in the world of today. I am sure too that there will be a day of reckoning at the end time. But the shape and timing of these things? I really have no idea.

For many, then, what the story of St Michael stirs up is the never-ending call to stand up for what is right against evil, whatever the odds: a desire rooted in the knowledge that, ultimately, the will of God will prevail, an antidote to the cynicism and fatalism of our age which tends to believe that we are all going to the dogs.

And the idea of angels stirs up in me an appreciation of so many living angels and the hugely positive things they are doing around the world.

The torrid debate in Parliament this week that has dominated the headlines called to mind a saying by the founder of the Church Army, Wilson Carlile: *We do not seek to drag the Church of England into the mud, but to bring some of the social mud into the Church of England.*

In other words, if the Church is to be relevant, if the Church has anything to say which will help our country emerge from this present mess, it can't just talk about heaven. It has to find ways of helping to make what we know to be true about heaven a reality on the streets of Islington as well as among the green benches in the Commons – *thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth - as it is in heaven.* Not for the first time we have to be angels, angels of harmony and of reconciliation. This kind of work may not be popular – we will almost certainly be attacked by one side of the debate or even by both – but that is too bad. If we aren't involved in what is going on then any talk of angels is all pie in the sky. As Cardinal Newman once wrote, *we need to be angels of peace and preachers of truth in our own place.*

While a few more angels in Parliament wouldn't go amiss, we need to encourage angels in other contexts too. Sustained by our belief in the angels of heaven, we can be angels in so many ways - in the service of those we live and work with, in the care of elderly neighbours, the lonely and the marginalised. I mentioned Pack-Up on the front of the Weekly News this week but that is only one example of so much that is going on, largely unseen, in our community.

But to hear someone say this week that their friend *had been an angel* was exactly what Wilson Carlile was hoping for, translating what we believe about heaven into the practical care of those in need.