

## Michael and All Angels: 27<sup>th</sup> September 2020

John 1: 47-end Revelation 12:7-12 Genesis 28:10-17

It felt a bit of a challenge to preach on Michael and All Angels again, having done so for three years in a row and always with these same readings. A challenge because, a little like Christmas, sometimes you begin to wonder what more you can say. But unlike Christmas, Michael and All Angels (or Michaelmas) is a festival that is not celebrated in every part of the church, and perhaps we feel more confident in speaking about Christmas than Angels. Angels feature heavily in the Christmas story, as messengers announcing to Mary that she would become the mother of Christ and then news of his birth to the shepherds with songs of praise and thanksgiving “glory to God in the Highest”. We know they are there; we do not question the part they play, but do not often ask who these angels are.

In common language, we might speak of another human or groups of humans as an ‘angel’ for being kind, helpful, in recent times, even sacrificial in their commitment to the welfare of others. But angels in Scripture are a separate order of creation. As Psalm 8:5 puts it: “what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour”. And as the author of the Letter to Hebrews says it is Jesus who for a little while was made lower than the angels (made human) but now is crowned with glory and honour because of his suffering of death. (Hebrews 2:6-9)

These mysterious creatures, seen or unseen, recognised or unnoticed, appear throughout Scripture. Occasionally there are accounts of them appearing in human form: once to Abraham and the one who seemed like a young man dressed in white at the empty tomb of the resurrection. In the Old Testament there are some graphic images of a hierarchy of angels: Cherubim – one placed with a flaming sword to guard the gate of Eden: Seraphim – six-winged creatures, who Isaiah described as singing God’s praises around the heavenly throne; and the Archangels – some of whom are given names: most notably Gabriel, who appeared to both Zechariah and to Mary, and Michael, who as the leader of God’s angel army defeated Satan in the apocalyptic vision of the Book of Revelation.

One way or another, we can see that throughout time, angels have interacted with human beings, always at God’s command and most usually as his messengers:

- bringing good news or announcing a significant moment in God’s plan (they were there at the birth and resurrection of Jesus)
- sustaining or encouraging (an angel fed Elijah in the desert; angels ministered to Jesus after the temptations in his wilderness)
- warning or protecting from danger, (an angel warned Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt; twice angels released Peter from prison)

But then in the two readings we have used this morning angels are more in the background of stories of two quite different human beings - and it is this I want to reflect on a little to see what message their experiences might have for us today.

In the Old Testament reading, Jacob dreamt of a ladder connecting heaven to earth, with angels ascending and descending. When Jacob had this dream, he was running away from what he had done in forcing his older brother Esau to sign over his inheritance. Then with their mother’s help he deceived his blind father into giving him his blessing by pretending to be Esau. He was alone in the desert somewhere between Beersheba and Haran, in unfamiliar territory. It was a hard, uncompromising place at the best of times, but the image of lying down on hard stones to sleep emphasises the discomfort he was in both physically and in his mind. In his dream the ladder reaching to heaven with the angels of God ascending and descending on it, caused him to realise God was present, even in such a place, speaking into his darkness and fear “for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” It is a long story, but the direction of Jacob’s life was changed from that point. Eventually there was forgiveness and reconciliation and Jacob became one of the great patriarchs of the faith.

Then in the gospel we find Nathanael who had been invited by his friend Philip to come and meet Jesus, a rabbi from Nazareth. He had gone reluctantly, doubtful that anything good could come from such a humble, even unworthy place. And while sitting “under the fig tree”, (a phrase Rabbis used to describe meditation on the Scriptures), he met with Jesus. He was surprised Jesus already knew him and somehow this made him realise who Jesus really was. Jesus told him one day he would see something even greater, something like Jacob’s ladder, “with angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man”.

Jacob's story was something Nathanael would have known well, but in placing himself in the image, Jesus not only reminded Nathanael of God's promised presence with him but that greater promise given to all who follow him, of life and a glory to come. We do not know much more of his story, but Nathanael is mentioned again at the end of John's gospel as one of the disciples to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection. It is possible he was the one who was referred to as Bartholomew in the other gospels. The point is that this image of angels had assisted him on his journey of faith.

Both these snippets of story tell something of the presence and purpose of angels. In both they were messengers, even though they were images in a dream or in a remembered story. In both they are active, constantly moving between heaven and earth. They gave assurance of God's presence, action, promise and connection. They were used by God to bring about change and growth in faith.

Surely here is a message too for us in our time. In this season of Michaelmas, we here in this part of the world, routinely enter a time of change: autumn, arrives with darker days. In the natural world, we see changes, maybe endings, and perhaps we are reminded of mortality. At the same time there are beginnings, returning to new school terms, older children leaving home to start a new phase of life. New challenges, new steps in the journeys of life. These are usual things, but this year, we find ourselves living through unusual times of uncertainty, anxiety and even fearfulness. Like Jacob in the desert, but for very different reasons, we find ourselves in unknown places of vulnerability. For some, lives have been affected by loss of work, relationships, and for most loss of what we think of as 'normality', and we long for God's light to show us the way through.

So perhaps this feast of Michael and All Angels comes at just the right time, if we can see in it a reminder that God is still with us, his angels still present, still working, still promising, still giving an assurance of glory yet to come. We may be challenged to discern the message they bring us. We may face choices in how we live our lives. In these days we may be reminded of our need of help, our dependence on God's grace and we pray in a more heartfelt way the Collect for today: "Everlasting God, .....: grant that as your holy angels always serve you in heaven, so, at your command, they may help and defend us on earth".

But above all we can give thanks that we *are* surrounded by angels to assist us and we pray we may be open to receive and understand the messages of hope and promise, care and protection they bring. For as God through his angels promised Jacob, "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you".

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