



Sermons on the Feast of St Michael and All Angels, 29th September 2019

Godfrey has asked that, at all the services today, you should be made aware of the statement issued by all the bishops in the Church of England on Friday, calling on people both inside and outside Parliament to treat each other with greater respect. We have printed copies of this pastoral statement, which we would like you to read, and please, to take home with you - and perhaps show it to your friends.

[Please see <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/bishops-call-respect-all-sides-amid-brexite-debate>)]

Michaelmas

Lessons at Mattins: Daniel 12.1-4, Acts 12.1-11, Psalm 150

Lessons at Evensong: Daniel 10.4-21, Revelation 5, Psalm 148

See <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=436417887>

Against that background I expect you might feel that it's rather good that we are, today with all the Western church, celebrating the feast of St Michael and All Angels. Where are those angels, when we surely do need them?

First, let's define our terms. "Michael, Gabriel and Raphael are the three named biblical angels, depicted as the beloved messengers of God."

Ἄγγελος, in Greek, means, a messenger. "Michael, which means 'who is like God?', is described as protector of Israel and leader of the armies of God and is perhaps best known for his victory over the dragon, which is told in the Revelation to John." [Rev. 12 - quotation from Brother Tristram SSF and Simon Kershaw, eds, (2007), *Exciting Holiness*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, p. 412].

Angels I - sermon delivered at Mattins

This morning I want to look at ‘angels’ in the Biblical context, and this evening I want to spend more time looking at the theology behind the idea of angels. Both this morning and tonight I will look at how angels could be relevant to our lives today.

Both this morning and this evening the lessons include passages from the Book of Daniel, which is almost as spectacularly weird a book as the Book of Revelation; indeed tonight, if you like apocalyptic stuff, you will get a double treat, because you will get passage from Daniel and a passage from Revelation. Definitely you are in the heavenly realm. As you read both of those passages, I think that merely earthly concerns will tend to fall away. Come tonight as well, and I’ll tell you about a very special guardian angel.

This morning we have heard a little passage from the twelfth chapter of the Book of Daniel. Daniel purports to be all about the people of Israel in exile in Babylon and then under the Persians, Syrians and Greeks, in such a way that Daniel, who was supposed to be along for the ride at all stages, would have had to have been alive for more than 400 years.

Scholars believe that the book wasn’t written at the time of the exile in Babylon, but 400 years later, about 200 BCE, after the Seleucid overthrow of the Ptolemies in Syria: the Syrians, the ‘Chaldeans’, and the resistance of the Jews led by the Maccabees. In this little vignette from Daniel’s visions we have actually what is the only explicit mention in the Old Testament of life after death. ‘Many of those who sleep in the dust shall awake.’ We know that the Pharisees did believe in life after death, but this is the only place in the Old Testament that you’ll actually see it spelt out. It’s pretty vague. The only thing to observe is that, if you read on beyond our passage, not everyone rises from the dead, but only the virtuous believers, the good and pious.

And the one who will lead the people of Israel against the evil Persian king in Daniel’s vision is Michael, ‘the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people.’ Michael, whose name means, ‘Who is like God’.

And then we come to the adventures of the Acts of the Apostles: this one

not one of St Paul's adventures, but involving St Peter himself, being put in prison and being guarded by four 'quaternions' of soldiers.

If you look up what a 'quaternion' is, the most common usage today connotes a complicated piece of mathematics. But under 'rare' meanings, the dictionary lists the meaning we would expect, which is that a quaternion is a group of four, so we have 16 soldiers guarding Peter in prison. Nevertheless, when everybody was asleep, somebody came along and let him out. He thought he was dreaming, but he went through the city gates - which opened by themselves - and then found that he was on his own, that the man had disappeared - or rather, the angel had disappeared. St Peter woke up and said that it had been a messenger from God. It had been an angel.

The 'Herod' who had put him in prison was the grandson of Herod the Great, Herod Agrippa I. Of course there is another miraculous escape from prison that Paul and Silas went through, in chapter 16 of the Acts. There they didn't in fact run away, though there had been an earthquake and the doors of the gaol had been opened; 'We are all here', they said, and the grateful gaoler became baptised and was converted.

What are we to make of these angels? Later on in the chapter in Acts, St Peter went, after he'd been freed by the angel, to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. Initially he couldn't get in. The maid, Rhoda, didn't open the gate to let him in, but instead she went inside to tell everyone that Peter was outside, standing at the gate. They said to her, 'You are nuts; you're out of your mind', but she insisted that it was so. They said, 'It is his angel', meaning that it wasn't really him. The idea was that a person's spirit - their ghost - could somehow separate itself from their body and roam around on its own. It could be mistaken for that person. They did let him in eventually.

There's that lovely passage in the letter to the Hebrews: 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers; for thereby some have entertained angels unawares'.

There is Michael, who is like God: so maybe in some senses an angel is God. In various places in the Bible there are hierarchies in heaven; in the Letter to the Hebrews, Psalm 8 is quoted:

‘What are human beings, that you are mindful of them?
You have made them little lower than the angels.’

Messengers of God. Maybe in future people will not really understand what a messenger was. The idea of having ‘brought the news from Ghent to Aix’, or that image from all those war films of the dusty dispatch rider on his Matchless 500 miraculously getting through a bombardment in order to give the news to the colonel in charge, just won’t make sense in an era of instant communication. Why do you need a messenger when you can use Skype?

When Peter was released from prison by the angel and went to the house where the faithful were praying for him, on the face of things we could say that their prayers had been answered. They were praying for him to be released, for sure. But perhaps we should be a little bit cautious about this. If we always pray for a guardian angel to come along and save us, or fix our problems, it’s like any other prayer. We can’t boss God about, even if we want to. We’re not addressing God as some kind of superhero boss, you know; ‘Please will you send your superman down to fix things for us.’ The most we can do is to pray, ‘Thy will be done’, and that God will do whatever is in accordance with his divine will.

I think we can infer from all this that what angels do, above all, their function in the divine economy, if you like, is that they are part of God’s revelation. They are one way that God makes Himself known to us. So if indeed something good happens, and an angel seems to be involved, then perhaps we can infer that we have had a glimpse of what God really intends. And given that it does look from time to time that there are guardian angels at work, that things happen, that things turn out, better than we could reasonably expect, for no apparent good reason, then we are tempted to say that it must be a guardian angel looking out for us. Why not? Why not let us give thanks to God for showing His love for us through an angel?

So let us in all humility give thanks to God for saints and angels, and for all the company of heaven.

Angels II - sermon delivered at Evensong

Tonight's lessons are visions of heaven, or at least of heavenly beings. Daniel's vision was of the 'man clothed in linen, whose loins were girded with fine gold of Uphaz', and all the other amazing jewellery and other finery, whom no-one except Daniel could see, who told him about being 'sent to him', but being delayed, by being caught up in a battle involving 'one of the chief princes, Michael', against 'the prince of Persia'.

It looks as though the angel, the messenger from God, is the man clothed in linen, rather than Michael, who is a leader of the Jewish army. But as I pointed out this morning, the Book of Daniel purports to cover a 400-year swathe of history, personally witnessed throughout by Daniel himself. Of course it isn't that: scholars agree that it is a book written about 200 BCE, in the context of the people of Israel's subjection to the Greeks - Alexander having conquered the Persians, who previously ruled Judah - and the history that Daniel claims to have witnessed from the exile in Babylon and Babylon's conquest by Syria, and so on, is not accurate at all.

The book falls into two halves, the first six chapters being this quasi-history, or rather a series of stories, like the fiery furnace and the escape of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from it in the face of the anger of king Nebuchadnezzar; King Belshazzar's feast, the writing on the wall, and the interpretation of it by Daniel; and Daniel's escape from the lions in their den, having been saved by the Lord - and by his angel. That's what it says.

The second part consists in Daniel's visions. The one we have here, of the spectacular man in linen clothing, comes in a dream where Daniel hears from Gabriel - described as 'the man Gabriel, whom I had already seen in the vision' - because indeed, when he had a vision of a ram being attacked by a flying he-goat, he heard a human voice asking someone 'with the semblance of a man' standing in front of him by the river Uai, 'Gabriel, explain the vision to this man.' The name Gabriel, we are told, means 'the strength of God'. He appears in other parts of the Bible where he is clearly identified as an angel - most famously in the Annunciation to Mary, that she will become the mother of the Messiah.

Then we have the chapter from Revelation, where there is a 'strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice', asking who is worthy to open the Book of Life with its seven seals, the answer being the Lamb, the Lamb that was slain, the embodiment of the humility, and at the same time the power, of

God.

These visions of 'saints and angels, and the whole company of heaven' are clearly not meant to be literally interpreted. 'Heaven' isn't a place; it isn't, as indeed Yuri Gagarin, the first astronaut, is supposed to have reported, a glittering mountain above the clouds. It's more of an idea, a concept. God and the realm of God is beyond our comprehension - indeed the idea of a 'realm', in the sense of a particular place, also doesn't make sense. God is, more or less by definition, everywhere.

In most of the angel stories in the Bible, the angel appears to someone in a dream. For instance you will recall the stories of Jacob's Ladder; of Jacob seeing a vision, in a dream, of angels ascending and descending into heaven; and the warning to Mary and Joseph in a dream not to take the baby Jesus back home to Nazareth, which saved him from Herod's slaughter of the innocents; and so on.

I think that angels are more personal, more targeted in their message towards a particular individual than the prophets. Prophets, on the other hand, proclaim to the world at large the word which they receive from God.

But why do people believe in, or at least feel so positive towards, the idea of angels? Why do people talk about having 'guardian angels'? I myself talked that way last autumn, almost exactly a year ago. I'll tell you the story.

I had gone to bed as usual at about 11 o'clock, and after reading three lines of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, I was sleeping the sleep of the just. But at about 3am I suddenly woke up, shivering violently in a way I had never experienced before. It was very worrying. I decided that I needed a Beecham's Powder. I took one, and the shivering gradually subsided. Then I realised that I was feverish, and that my right ankle and shin were sore and swollen.

I went back to bed, thinking that I'd caught some fluey bug - the sort of thing that some people call 'man flu' (which is a misconception, of course) - and that if I stayed in bed for a day or so, took more Beecham's Powders and possibly had a snort or two of Scotch, I would be fine. At 9 o'clock I

woke up again, phoned all the people that I was going to see that day, and cancelled my appointments. I relaxed, took another Beecham's Powder, and went back to bed.

About an hour later, my daughter Emma rang me, completely out of the blue. She is a head-and-neck surgeon, and last year she was a surgical registrar in a hospital in Bristol. She was between operations on her morning list. In the post that morning, her new iPhone X had arrived. In between operations, she was trying it out.

'I know', she said to herself, 'I'll ring Dad and see how he is'. And that's what she did. I told her how I was. She said she didn't like the sound of it, and would come and see me. I told her not to worry. I'd taken the Beecham's Powders and I would be absolutely fine in the morning.

Actually, in the morning, I wasn't fine. My leg had really swollen up, and I felt pretty ghastly. But before I had had time to worry much about it, Emma was there. She'd scooped up my little grandson Jim, who's now nearly three, and driven from Bristol first thing. An hour later I was admitted to Epsom Hospital with what she had correctly diagnosed, over the phone, as sepsis.

Those of you who follow the Archers will know that sepsis will see you off in 48 hours, or at the very least cause you to have limbs amputated, if it's not treated very quickly. I had about 24 hours to live when I was admitted. Emma had saved her Dad's life.

Emma had no good reason to ring me. It wasn't a regular phone call spot. We didn't have any special news to tell each other - or rather, she didn't have any special news to tell me. What gave her the idea to call me? We'll never know - but I know that she saved me, and that it felt as though she was really my guardian angel.

Who knows whether that makes coherent theological sense? All I do know, is that I did feel very blessed. God had cared for me, and had sent Emma as His angel. How wonderful thou art!

I don't know whether it is more than just a nice heartening story. A sceptic would surely say that. Even comparing it with the Biblical angel stories,

Emma certainly didn't remember any dreams, with angels telling her to ring home in them.

We like to experience visions, or to use our imagination to create worlds. Think of the popularity of those epic TV sagas like Game of Thrones - or indeed the upstairs-downstairs world of Downton Abbey. For most people that world, that world of the landed aristocracy in a bygone age, could be just as much a figment of the imagination as Game of Thrones. Maybe indeed the visions in Daniel and in the Book of Revelation, the pictures in glorious Technicolor of the heavenly realms, the images of God on his throne surrounded by his angels and with the Lamb at his right hand, sitting on golden thrones; maybe those visions are just that, dream sequences, myths which our own minds have produced.

We are attracted - perhaps in the way that we feel a pull to look over the edge of a precipice - to the idea of the end time, to the Apocalypse, the great revealing, the great Revelation, and the final judgement, the separation of the sheep from the goats.

Poor old goats - they're always the baddies. Just as in Daniel's vision of the Lamb and the he-goat, and again at the end of time. The Jews had their idea of the Scapegoat, another poor goat on to whose horns all the sins were metaphorically, sacramentally tied in a red cloth by the priests, who drove the poor animal out to starve in the desert. He died for their sins. He took upon himself the burden of their sin. Just as we say Jesus did for us.



The Scapegoat, by William Holman Hunt (1854-1856)

Liberal theologians like John Robinson, in *Honest to God*, and Don Cupitt, in *The Sea of Faith*, or Paul Tillich, have argued that God isn't a thing, defined in time and space, but rather is the heart of our being, or that God goes beyond, transcends, all existence; so perhaps in a similar way angels, angels appearing to us in dreams, may not exist in the same way that tables and chairs exist: but it is perfectly in order for us to fantasise about them, to make pictures in our minds of them, in our semi-conscious moments. And I still think that my daughter Emma has an angel behind her. I hope and pray that you, when you are in need, are as fortunate as I was. I really think that God sent me an angel.