

Michaelmas 29nd Sept 2024

Readings

Genesis 28:10-17

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' Then Jacob woke from his sleep and 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.'

Revelation 12:7-12

War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,
'Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.
But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,

for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.
Rejoice then, you heavens
and those who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea,
for the devil has come down to you
with great wrath,
because he knows that his time is short!

Gospel

John 1:47-51

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

SERMON

Loving God, as the hosts of angels minister to you in heaven, may they guard and guide us in our earthly existence, now and always. **Amen.**

Today we mark Michaelmas, the Feast of St Michael and All Angels, a festival which for centuries has been celebrated in the Western church on or on the Sunday after 29th September. Michaelmas falls after the autumn equinox when the nights are drawing in. It perhaps was a fitting time for our forebears, reflecting upon the dangers of the encroaching winter, to honour the Archangel St Michael and his angelic armies, and call upon their protective oversight for the challenging months ahead.

In the 9th-11th centuries St Michael had become a popular figure and a common choice for the dedication of a church. It is very likely that our own St Michael's church was founded in that period along with many other churches in the growing medieval town of Cambridge. It so happens that, Michaelmas 2024 marks a significant anniversary for St Michael's church - 700 years ago, at Michaelmas in 1324, philanthropist and Chancellor of the Exchequer Hervey de Stanton founded the college of Michaelhouse. In preparation for this he purchased the patronage of St Michael's church and rebuilt it to serve in part as the college chapel. Michaelhouse college was later amalgamated in the 16th century with its neighbour, Kings Hall to form Trinity College, but its 700 year old chapel remains to this day as place of regular worship, and its dedication to St Michael has therefore been continued in that location for possibly 1000 years or more.

Angels retain a powerful place in popular imagination, even in our increasingly secular post-modern age. A recent IPSOS survey of British people found that nearly one half of them believed in guardian angels. Three quarters of these angel believers said that they had experienced an angel intervening in their lives. The survey also showed that one in five people who didn't believe in the God of organised religion, nevertheless believed in Angels.

If we apply those statistics to this congregation, that would mean a good number of us might admit to an experience of an angel. And I would count myself as one of them. Many years ago, for a few precious hours either side of my mother's death, I became aware of hosts of angels, even populating the corridors of Addenbrookes hospital. It was of course a very vulnerable time, and unusual otherworldly experiences are well reported in people who experience intense stress or bereavement. But for me this experience was not just a comforting dream; the memory of it remains as clear as day, and my confidence in its reality, albeit an extraordinary reality, remains as sure as it was then. It became a profound turning point; it was as if I had been gifted with a new lens through which to experience the world. Thus began the reawakening of an increasing openness to the presence of Love at the heart of all things, which continues to this day.

Angels are certainly very much part of the Christian imagining of the world; today they feature in our readings, collect, hymns, anthem and also they will appear in the words of the service of holy communion, just before the singing of the Sanctus. Whilst much of the Bible consists of stories and chronicles recording seemingly ordinary events of human existence, angels are often the means by which these narratives are torn open to reveal an extraordinary dimension to the story which is being told. The word most commonly chosen to describe angels is *malakh* in OT Hebrew and *angellos* in the NT Greek, both of which can be translated as messenger. These messengers of God are extraordinary beings appearing in the ordinary world, intermediaries through whom the unknowable God can be known and experienced. Biblical accounts describe angels appearing in dreams or visions (as they did to Jacob), but also just showing up in ordinary life. Sometimes when they do, they are recognised as angels, as by Mary when visited by the Angel Gabriel, but on other occasions they either are not seen, or are mistaken for humans: Abraham unknowingly entertained three of them.

Angels, aren't simply messengers though, they also are a means of God's action in the world. An angel went before Moses and the people of God in the

wilderness to protect them and act as their guide, and angels are likewise referred to in the psalms as a means of divine protection.

But when people go astray, angels become the mediators of God's judgement bringing pestilence or warfare. It is an angel of death who, on the occasion remembered by Jews at Passover, sweeps through the homes of the enslaving Egyptians, killing all of the first-born and livestock.

Angels also minister not only to peoples but to individuals; it was an angel who came to the aid of Hagar and the child Ishmael, who had been banished by Abraham, and an angel appeared to Ezekiel in the desert to ensure he would eat. And an angel came to Jesus in his agony in Gethsemane.

In the only clear account of personal guardian angels in the bible, Matthew describes Jesus explaining that each little innocent child (and if we are able, through the Grace of Christ, to access own innocency, that surely could mean each one of us), each innocent child has an angel which always looks towards the father in heaven, a powerful image of protective guardianship.

Whilst the Bible describes angels breaking in from time to time into our ordinary reality and disrupting the course of events, it describes angels existing in their multitudes in the extraordinary realms. Jesus announces to his disciples that angels will surround Him in his ascended place next to his Father, and that they will be with him in his Glory to help bring in the end of the age. And, as we have heard today in the Revelation to John, angels mediate in the spiritual battle in the heavenly realms against the evil one.

The angels of modern imagination owe a great deal to representations in medieval, renaissance and later art. Neither the human-shaped being with huge feathery wings, nor the chubby cupid-like cherub can be found in the Bible, nevertheless, these are ideals, archetypes, with great power to comfort and symbolise love and protection. Many people today are unable to believe in a God for diverse and understandable personal and cultural reasons. But I wonder if the persistence of angel in our collective imagination means that angels become

means for people to make sense of a deeply held intuitive sense of the extraordinary love and protection that is there at the heart of things, and particularly so at times of great vulnerability.

In our gospel reading today Jesus recognises Nathaneal as an honest and God-fearing man, a true Israelite, a descendant of the patriarch Jacob. When Nathaneal recognises Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, Jesus uses imagery, with which, as devout Jews, the disciples will all be familiar; that of the angels passing from heaven to earth and back. This is the angelic stairway or ladder seen by Jacob in his dream. When Jacob awoke, he recognised God had burst into his location with the angels, and proclaimed **“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it”**.

Jesus tells the disciples that now he is the location of that angelic ladder. In doing so, he is spelling out that no longer will God be limited to particular places, or encounters. Being in Christ will usher in for each of us a new order of existence, one in which the ordinary and extraordinary become intertwined. Christ is this means of bringing heaven and earth together. Jesus describes this coming together in the form of a continual angelic exchange between these two formerly separate realms.

Angels are a means, for us, to conceptualise how a loving, ministering and protecting God can interact with the world and not remain distant. The archetype of the protecting angel is powerful and stirs the imagination even of the unbeliever. But for the Christian, the image of the angelic traffic used by Jesus describes the mystery of the bringing together of his humanity and divinity. Wherever Christ is, there go angels, mediating between heaven and earth.

As Christians we are called as a Church, a body of people, to be bearers of Christ, and, therefore, surely the church which bears Christ becomes a location of that angelic ladder connecting heaven to earth. Can we take that in? That this angelic ladder is in the here and now of any church community which truly bears Christ in its people. That is quite a thought. Perhaps we too might one day wake up, like Jacob, and be able to say, wherever we may be, that because we are in

Christ, **“Surely the Lord is in this Place, This is none other than the house of God and this is the Gate of Heaven”**. Amen.

