

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 18th Sunday after Trinity

Michael and All Angels

29th September 2024

All Saints' Marseille and Aix-en-Provence

Jane Quarmby, Licensed Lay Minister

Today we celebrate Michael the Archangel and all angels – but do we actually think about what we are celebrating? Do we, nowadays, really believe in angels at all? Michaelmas is now a season in the agricultural year, a term in the scholastic year, even a flower which blooms in September – the Michaelmas Daisy.

The word angel crops up all over the Bible in both the Old Testament and the New. We heard this morning about Jacob seeing angels going up and down a ladder to heaven, (which is also now a flower – Jacob's Ladder), in the psalm we spoke of the angels of the Lord, the mighty ones who do his bidding, our New Testament reading from Revelation describes how Michael and his angels won the fight against Satan and his angels, and threw them out of heaven and onto earth. Not good news for us, living on earth, to have Satan and his angels here with us and in a very bad temper. And in our Gospel Jesus tells Nathanael he will see "the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man".

The hymns that we sing are sprinkled liberally with angels too. On a quick poll in my hymn book about 10% have a reference to angels. At Christmas we sing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing"; "The Angel Gabriel from heaven came" to tell Mary the news of her holy child to come, and another old favourite is "While Shepherds watched their flocks by night" when the angel tells them of the Christ child. Look around most churches and you'll see depictions of angels in stained glass windows, in flight in the stonework, in paintings. You'll find any amount of them in art galleries too – especially paintings of Gabriel and Mary, and sculptures like the powerful one of Sir Jacob Epstein's "Jacob and the Angel", exhibited in the Tate Gallery. Angels are also in a number of modern songs – Robbie Williams had a hit with his song "Angels", the Eurythmics had a number 1 hit with "There must be an angel" and you'll no doubt think of lots of others.

They pop up nowadays in TV series and films – who doesn't cheer for Clarence the guardian angel who gets his wings in "A Wonderful Life"? If you haven't seen the film, it will be on TV again this Christmas. And they are even now in sport – there's a baseball team in LA called the Los Angeles Angels. We have an angel on top of our Christmas tree, and you can buy little angel brooches and charms in jewelers' shops.

So angels have been with us since time began and are still highly visible in some form now. But what about real angels? In the First World War, a number of servicemen told of seeing a troop of angels between them and the German forces, others of a single angel, or 4 or 5 angels protecting them from overwhelming odds. The men who told these stories were often not believed, they were exhausted, in pain, frightened – but these weren't raw recruits, they were tough experienced soldiers at the Battle of Mons, heavily outnumbered and up against impossible odds. But they survived, and many were convinced it was due to the intervention of Michael and his angels.

Angels appear in many religions and cultures, but in today's world what do we think? Do we all have a guardian angel who looks over us? Is God not alone in heaven but has any number of divine beings who not only worship him but are active in our world too? Without angels in the Bible, there would be an awful lot of gaps – and, without angels doing God's will, there would be an awful lot of gaps in our world too. Does the church believe in angels? Well, in 2020, at a time of misery caused by the pandemic, angels began appearing all over England, made by local churches. Everything from full sized illuminated versions in Somerset, to teenagers delivering small angels with a card to people in care homes. They brought hope, and comfort, and a smile to people's faces.

At the heart of today's festival of St Michael is the recognition of the reality and presence of angels, and their participation in the war against evil and darkness. It's a source of comfort to believe that angels are on our side, they protect us, mostly without our knowing. God created angels as well as us. They are his messengers, like Gabriel, protectors, like Michael, healers, like Raphael. Augustine considered that "the good angels seek at all times to direct us towards the true source of happiness, God; that they encourage us in worship of God". The catechism of the Catholic church states "The whole life of the church benefits from the mysterious and powerful help of the angels.... From its beginning until death, human life is surrounded by their watchful care and

intercession... Christ is the centre of the angelic world. They are his angels... They belong to him because they were created through and for him.”

So yes, we need angels, and yes, we need to let them into our lives, to bring us hope, protection, reassurance and comfort, to guide us in living our lives as nearly as possible to how Jesus directed us to live them. Not in fear, not in the pursuit of our wants and desires at the expense of others, not in isolation from God, but in the light. And if Satan and his dark angels are roaming about in high bad humour, doing their best to lead us astray, to cause havoc, pain, misery and darkness, then I for one welcome as many of God’s angels into my life as can cram themselves in.

I’m going to finish with the words from Robbie Williams’ song – not the usual prophet for a Sunday but I really like these lyrics:

“I sit and wait
Does an angel contemplate my fate?
And do they know the places where we go
When we’re grey and old?
‘Cause I have been told
That salvation lets their wings unfold.

So when I’m lying in my bed
Thoughts running through my head
And I feel that love is dead
I’m loving angels instead.

And through it all she offers me protection
A lot of love and affection, whether I’m right or wrong
And down the waterfall, wherever it may take me
I know that life won’t break me
When I come to call, she won’t forsake me
I’m loving angels instead.

When I’m feeling weak
And my pain walks down a one way street
I look above
And I know I’ll always be blessed with love.”

It just goes to show - angels are often in the most unexpected places.
Amen.