

Thine is the Glory

Feast of St Michael and All Angels 2019

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Readings:

Gen 28:10-17

Rev 12: 7-12

John 1: 47-51

+ *In Nomine*

It's relatively rare that we celebrate the Feast of St Michael and All Angels on a Sunday and have the opportunity to reflect on an aspect of the faith that many in this age of secular reason might regard as arcane at best or unbelievable at worst – angels perhaps being consigned by many to the land of fairies and fantasy. Yet as well as celebrating angels, this feast celebrates the “glory of God” which as we sang in our first hymn, *the angels worship, veiling their faces*.

So who or what are angels and what's our evidence for their existence?

Holy Scripture both Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha speaks of created intelligences other than humans who worship God in heaven and act as His messengers and agents on earth. Isaiah's vision of the Heavenly worship in ch 6:1-8 is a vision of angels worshipping God using the same words as we use in our worship today as at the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer we join our prayer here on earth with that of the whole company of heaven, angels and saints. The final book of the New Testament also envisions the Heavenly worship with angels worshipping God with clouds of incense and joined by the white robed army of martyrs whose robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. And Jesus himself often refers to angels – only two weeks ago in our Gospel we heard that Jesus said that there is *joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents*.

The word Angel comes from the Greek word Angelos meaning messenger. In the Book of Genesis, Abraham entertains three mysterious strangers at the oak of Mamre. These angelic visitors relay God's promise of a child for Abraham and Sarah. By the time of Jesus, Jewish popular belief included many specifics about angels, with names for many of them. Chief

among the angels is Michael, the 'warrior angel' (whose name means "Who is like God?"). He is said to be the captain of the heavenly armies. He is mentioned in the Scriptures in Daniel 10:13,31; 12:1; in Jude 9 and in Revelation 12:7 which we heard this morning. He is generally depicted in full armour, carrying a lance, and with his foot on the neck of a dragon. All through history, Michael has fought the battles of God. He is the Devil's strong enemy. He is the friend and protector of all those who love God and follow Jesus Christ. He is always on the side that is right and good and he is our protector against the forces of evil in our world.

The second archangel is Gabriel, God's special messenger. Gabriel's name means "the power of God." He is mentioned in the book of Daniel [8:16, 9:21] where he explains some of Daniel's visions. He is prominent more importantly in the early chapters of Luke's Gospel.

This archangel announced to Mary that God had chosen her to be the mother of our Saviour. It was most likely Gabriel who announced to Zechariah in the Temple that he and St. Elizabeth would have a son and call him John. It is also likely that Gabriel was the angel who appeared to Joseph, encouraging him to take Mary as his wife and later to flee into refuge with his young family to escape Herod's murderous intent.

Gabriel is the announcer, the communicator of Good News.

The third archangel is Raphael who is God's healer, restorer, protector and guide. Raphael's name means "God has healed." We read the story of Raphael's role in the Bible's book of Tobit, where disguised as a man he guides and protects Tobias on his journey and is the means of bringing protection, restoration and healing to blind Tobit. He is also the Angel mentioned in John 5:1-4 as the power behind the healing at the sheep pool. Raphael is the patron of travellers and those suffering from all sorts of illness.

Along with these archangels entrusted by God with special powers there are many other angels – immortal spirits created by God mentioned in Holy Scripture – who sometimes like Raphael are given human form for a time by God to fulfil His purpose as His messengers. As attested in Holy Scripture, Angels carry out the following tasks for God.

Their main activity is **worship and praise** of God portrayed in Heaven (Isaiah 6:1-3; Revelation 4-5)

They serve as **messengers** to communicate God's will.

Angels serve as **instructors and guides**. Angels gave instructions to Joseph about the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1-2), to the women at the tomb, to Philip (Acts 8:26), and to Cornelius (Acts 10:1-8).

God used angels to **provide** physical needs such as food for Hagar (Genesis 21:17-20), Elijah (1 Kings 19:6), and Jesus after His temptation (Matthew 4:11).

Angels also act as **protectors and guardians** - keeping God's people out of physical danger, as in the cases of Daniel and the lions, and his three friends in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3 and 6). Whether we choose to believe it or not, we all have a Guardian Angel.

Angels can also be **rescuers or deliverers** who release God's people out of danger. Angels released the apostles from prison in Acts 5 and released Peter in Acts 12.

They can be deployed by God as **strengtheners and encouragers**: Angels strengthened Jesus after His temptation (Matt 4:11), encouraged the apostles to keep preaching after releasing them from prison (Acts 5:19-20), and told Paul that everyone on his ship would survive the impending shipwreck (Acts 27:23-25).

God often uses angels as His means of **answering the prayers of His people** (Daniel 9:20-24—Gabriel sent to Daniel; 10:10-12—Michael sent to Daniel; Acts 12:1-17—Peter released from prison).

Angels may **care for believers at the moment of death**—In the story of Lazarus and the rich man, we read that angels carried the spirit of Lazarus to "Abraham's bosom" when he died (Luke 16:22). Angels are often invoked to aid the passage of the departed in some prayers of commendation in modern Christian funeral rites.

Angels also remind us humans that among beings created by God we are not at the 'top of the pile'. In Psalm 8 vs 4-5 we hear these words: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? ... For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels..." (Psalm 8:4,5). Angels are immortal – humankind is not. And we also know too that some angels are 'fallen'. They are not all good – some follow the lead of Lucifer [which means of the light] the fallen Archangel also known as the devil, whose pride caused God to banish the angel of light to the realms of darkness. It was Lucifer who tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God. Humankind is open to temptation from the prince of darkness and his cohort. Never underestimate the power of this evil. The greater our natural gifts and talents, the greater the damage if we turn them to bad ends.

And yet, in the picture of God sending His angels to help and defend us, we are reminded that God, instead of doing good things directly, often prefers to do them through His willing servants, enabling those who have accepted His love to show their love for others.

On this Feast of St Michael and all Angels, let us give thanks for the many ways in which God's loving care watches over us, both directly and indirectly via His messengers and protectors, His holy angels. Let us also remember that the richness and variety of God's creation far exceeds our knowledge of it. And lastly let us be mindful for the need to exercise charity and care for others for as the Letter to the Hebrews Ch 13:2 reminds us: *Do not forget to exercise hospitality; for by it some have entertained angels unawares.*