

29th September 2019 - St Michael & All Angels

I only realised yesterday evening that the last line of our epistle reading is quoted by my favourite band, Iron Maiden¹. And this reminded me of St Paul's quote in 2 Corinthians that If I speak in the tongue of men, and of angels, but do not have love - then I am only making an awful noise. Which is probably how most of you think Iron Maiden sound.

Seriously though, it is the feast of St Michael & All Angels, and I think angels - or what we think about them can tell us about God's love, conscience, and protection.

I was amazed to learn a statistic from a poll that one in three people believe that they have a guardian angel - but just 25% believe in God. I heard this at a talk given by Peter Stanford, writer for the Sunday Times, Guardian, Observer, and Telegraph amongst others - on whether it is possible to believe in God or angels without the other². Another statistic, from Paula Gooder's excellent little book on heaven - is that 31% of people in Britain believe in angels³.

¹ 'But woe to you, O earth & sea, for the Devil sends the Beast with wrath; because he knows his time is short...'

I really think he has a point. Belief in angels is something that are incredibly widespread. I have to say, I have always been interested in angels. One of my most treasured possessions is a little triptych from my Dad when he was away in London - showing Gabriel, Michael, Mary & Jesus. The church where I got baptised was dedicated to St Michael & All Angels in St Helen's. One of my favourite comedy films is 'Dogma' - a film about 2 rogue angels trying to get into heaven. Angels still permeate our language... we refer to children (sometimes in rather hopeful terms) as Little Angels. Some of us may believe we have met an angel.

But what are they? We've all heard of Gabriel, If you haven't, feel free to come again around Christmas! Gabriel is a type of angel we often think about - a messenger. The word, angelos, from where we get angel means 'messenger'; and both this word and the one used for 'angel' in the Old Testament can be used interchangeably whether talking about divine or human messengers.

We've all heard of Gabriel. But what about Michael - who we celebrate today? If you look at the picture on your

² Peter Stanford, 'Loving Angels Instead?', *Greenbelt Festival 2019: Wit & Wisdom*. Available to download from Greenbelt website.

³ Paula Gooder, *Heaven* (SPCK: 2011), P. 32-58.

bulletin, you will notice that he is in military dress - referring to his feats in St John's imagination and writings in Revelation of how heaven and earth will come together into God's kingdom... this is where we get a lot of our cultural ideas about angels & devils, that were later developed by Dante's Divine Comedy - which picks up and John Milton's 'Paradise Lost'. Michael is tied up with protection.

One prayer to St Michael prayer I picked up from a church of on holiday reads:

'O Lord, grant your angel Michael to defend us in our battles, to be a safeguard against wickedness and snares. May he rebuke for you as Prince of the heavenly host, the devil and all wicked spirits who wander this world to seek ruin upon our souls'.

In some ways, that is a rather fanciful prayer, but it picks up a development in our thinking about angels that is close to our idea about having a guardian angel. In the book of Daniel, he is represented as the guardian angel of the Israelites far from their home in Jerusalem in Babylon.

Another I think we can learn from angels is closeness. I said we refer to our children as 'little angels'; but in our

gospel reading this morning, Jesus uses that theme when the disciples are wondering who is the greatest in heaven.

Jesus picks up a small child, and places them right in the middle of the disciples jockeying for power. It completely undercuts all the prestige, the positioning and posturing because this child - aside from probably being startled and curious at being called - had none of the attitude that the disciples were showing.

Jesus is reminding them, in his words about angels seeing God's face, that God is close to those who feel side-lined and marginalised. So much, in fact, Jesus implies, that they are closer to God in heaven than Gabriel, Michael, and all the other angels - and they aren't scared to be there. They are happy in God's presence and don't feel in any way unworthy to be there - which is a lesson for us too as we seek to live as children of God. As we'll sing in our final hymn, 'with a well-tuned heart sing thou the song of love'.

Thirdly, conscience. Whenever I hear the word "angels," to be honest my first thought is not of their religious history or meaning, but of the opening words of my very favourite carol: 'It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth'.

One night, several years back as I walked home from a shift in the pub (earning money, not spending it!) I was assaulted by 2 drunk lads. Bust nose, lip, and bruised ribs - not to mention blood on my brand new coat! Just as I was shoved into a fence - I heard someone shouting at them to stop, and that they'd call the police. Off they ran at this, and a bloke helped me up, asked me if I was okay, then disappearing around the opposite corner back towards the pub. My manager arrived then, having seen the lads start after me on the CCTV. It's puzzled me since as to whether that was an angel or coincidence. Based on St Michael's attributes, it could well have been. Or it could just have been a good Samaritan whose conscience urged them to help rather than cross on the other side.

But either way, how does that matter to us, as people, as a church?

John Hall, the Dean of Westminster, wrote:

"Through our fellowship in the Church, Christ's Body, God informs our conscience through his Word and feeds our soul through the sacraments, drawing us together into unity with each other and with himself. So the Church understands the work and role of the angels as assisting in mediating the presence of God with us and amongst us."

That's our aim. People come to churches because they feel different, and they should be spaces where we can feel closer to God and each other. A place to come to 'hush the noise, ye folk of strife, and hear the angels sing'.

Our thoughts about angels like St Michael, now as in the Bible, teach us the virtues of protection and watchfulness. We can also learn from angels to be close to God- and to be transformed by his grace. And we are to be messengers - to go in our turn and be angels to others - perhaps even without us knowing it.

Amen.