

Sunday 29 September 2023, Michaelmas Parish Eucharist

Daniel 10. 4-21

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

Michael, Michael, Archangel, Of the King of Kings, Give ear to our voices.

We acknowledge thee to be the Prince Of the citizens of heaven:

And at thy prayer God sends His angels unto men,

That the enemy with cunning craft shall not prevail

To do the hurt he craves To weary men.

Much of what we do in church is a mystery to those outside of it. The ancient world of Christendom, which existed at least until the Second World War, has largely fallen away, replaced by a post-Christendom-- and in many ways post-Christian-- society. Where established Christianity remains, as it does in England, it is a shell of its former self and subsists largely on memory. We look to the past rather than the future; we treasure what was and when we imagine what might be, it often takes the form of a revived past because we simply cannot imagine a future on its own terms. I do not say this to discourage, but to set the scene. You see, there are some aspects of the old order that remain. Church buildings like this one are part of that order, as are the priests. We still wear the old vestments and speak the old prayers, calling back into existence, for a brief moment, Christendom's ancient glory.

Another curious survival in the post-Christian age is the belief in angels. People may doubt the deity of Jesus Christ, or even his existence, but they do not doubt the angels. Sometimes their faith is so great as to imagine that, upon dying, we become angels!- though there is no ground for this, even in the strangest mystical moments of the middle ages. Angels remain a fascinating and tantalising part of Christian belief even when almost everything else has faded away. Why, I wonder, is this so? A simple answer is that angels exist, so they are believed in. But, of course, we run into the problem of wondering why those outside the church don't believe so easily in Jesus' resurrection or in the virginal conception in the womb of Mary. I am led to believe the solution to this puzzle lies in Archbishop Cranmer's collect for today's feast: 'O Everlasting God, who hast ordained and constituted the services of Angels and men in a wonderful order; Mercifully grant, that, as thy holy Angels alway do thee service in heaven; so by thy appointment they may succour and defend us on earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

God, says Cranmer, constituted an order in the universe; angels going to and fro at God's command in the service of mankind, their service of us but an echo of their eternal service of the one who made them and who dwells in unapproachable light. It is their service that makes them known and evokes our belief in them? Have you ever met an angel? Felt its presence? Or even seen one? Do you know someone who has? I reckon we would all find ourselves surprised if our friends and relations were honest enough to say what they have undoubtedly experienced. The sense of angelic presence is not uncommon, nor is the occasional glimpse of something assuredly heavenly and safe-making in times of difficulty or danger. Our imaginations are not so powerful

as to invent the time when we were physically pulled back from the road or turned to go another way, just in the nick of time. The angels ever do us service.

Michael, whose name serves to represent the whole holy host we celebrate today, was not expunged from the calendar of worship at the Reformation, though we might imagine he would be the first to go: weigher of immortal souls and accompanier of the faithful to heaven. The mysterious service he does is recounted a little in our lesson from Daniel and more fully in the lesson from Revelation read earlier at the eucharist. Michael, meaning 'Who like the Lord?', fights as God's strong arm against the fell powers of Satan and his chattering, chaotic host.

Knowest thou wherefore I come unto thee?-- says one who is probably the archangel Gabriel-- [N]ow will I return to fight with the prince of Persia: and when I am gone forth, lo, the prince of Grecia shall come. But I will shew thee that which is noted in the scripture of truth: and there is none that holdeth with me in these things, but Michael your prince. A war of angels is hinted at in Daniel's vision. And those who stand against darkness are none other than Michael and Gabriel. Captains of the angelic band they constantly strive against the evil one's own captains, the so-called Princes of Persia and of Greece. Thus the servants of the one true God take up arms against the gods who are no gods, the demonic 'old gods' of the pagan religions.

Is it so hard to believe in, this cosmic war? It would seem not, for we write angelic messages on our walls 'angels watch over this house', and we draw angel wings on our bodies, and we ask that angels will defend our loved ones when they travel. Sometimes we reduce angels to sentimental cherubs, plump babes with impossibly tiny wings. But we still trust in their ability to defend us. This, I believe, is because we know they can. And though we take away their fierceness and make it all sweetness and sugar, when worse comes to worse, we know they can wield a sword in their tiny manicured hands. A celebration of angels is what we make today, preserving a deep truth of Christendom that still speaks fresh to the world beyond our walls. Let us take the opportunity the angels give for us to call up other truths, contested and disbelieved and uncertainly applied. Let us remember for ourselves the times we have sensed the angelic presence, and give thanks to God who is like no other and who has constituted the services of angels and men in a wonderful order, an order dedicated to His praise and His glory, and also to our good.

Hear us, Michael, Greatest angel,
Come down a little From thy high seat,
To bring us the strength of God,
And the lightning of His mercy...
And give us to share In the joys of the blessed.

Amen.