

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Angels and Ministry Michaelmas 2019 (29/09/19)

Genesis 28.10-17

John 1.47-51

29th September - The Feast of Michael and All Angels , 'Michaelmas Day' – one of the old Quarter days of the year, when rents used to fall due, the festival which lends its name to the Autumn term at some universities and schools, as well as in the Law - obviously it is, or has been, a significant festival in our culture with its Christian roots: the feast of the angels. But what do we think of it now? Is a day when we stop and think about heavenly angels just a distraction from the real and all-too urgent issues of the world? Is it a kind of escape into a make-believe world of golden hair, shining haloes and feathery wings? Does it mean anything to us?

I wonder how many people here would say they believe in angels?.And, if you do, how many of you would say you have a vivid sense of angels, of their presence, of their activity...?

If rather few active members of the Christian church have a strong sense of angels, that's an interesting irony, because all around us in our culture are hundreds of people who rarely, if ever, come to church who have a strong belief in angels – they may see white feathers left on the ground as significant signs that angels are present, they may attend courses or read books about how to contact their guardian angel, they may very poignantly believe that their deceased loved-ones – especially children – have *become* angels. In all this belief, *God* may hardly feature - if at all. Hold in your mind for a while this irony – that we, whose Scriptures are full of angels, possibly have far less sense of them than millions of our contemporaries. Hold that thought...

Angels occur throughout the Bible: today's first reading was from Genesis: they're there right on through to the Book of Revelation. Sometimes, especially in the earlier books, the angel of the Lord seems to be an embodiment of God's presence himself; at other times they are clearly servants of God, a mysterious myriad glimpsed at mystical moments, as in Jacob's dream. Angels are seen or sensed as protectors of God's people, members of the heavenly host – you may

remember the fourth figure who appeared in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Was it an angel, or was it the Lord himself? One of my favourite stories about angels comes from the saga about Elisha the prophet: the Israelites were under siege in the city of Dothan, and Elisha was among them. The king of Aram had surrounded it with a vast army. I'll let the Biblical text take up the story:

'When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, 'Alas, master! What shall we do?' He replied, 'Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.' Then Elisha prayed: 'O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.' So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.' (2 Kings 6.15-17)

The sequel to this is, of course, that the Aramaeans were driven away, struck blind at the prophet's prayer, and the Israelites were saved. This Old Testament story sticks with me, because I remember hearing Archbishop Desmond Tutu, during the days of Apartheid, speaking of having a sense that invisible powers which were surrounding and fighting on the side of those who were

struggling against that evil. His words gave me a reason to believe that the ancient story had contemporary relevance

Angels make up the heavenly court which worships perpetually around God's throne, both in the Old Testament and the New. Sometimes they are described as living creatures very unlike ourselves – cherubim and seraphim with six wings all covered with eyes – whilst at other times they appear like young men to bring God's people messages. They are the revealers of what's to come, and abound in apocalyptic literature, both in the Bible, and in other Jewish writings. We know how often they appear within the Gospel stories, and how very characteristic it is of them to tell those they appear to not to fear. Jesus himself said that in the resurrection life we shall be *'like angels, neither marrying nor being given in marriage'*, and he spoke mysteriously of the danger of offending his little ones whose angels gaze continuously on the face of his Father in heaven (Matt.18.10).

Since there is so much about angels in the foundations of our faith, why have they retreated, for some of us, to the edges of our faith? Is it because of the secular and

materialistic temper of our age –as though it's impossible to entertain thoughts of angels and nuclear power or the human genome in the same mind? Is it because some of us – and this applies to me – have a personality which is weak on that intuitive faculty which might help us see beyond the veil of physical reality? Others - including some present - may have the gift of spiritual awareness which just isn't given to everyone? Or maybe we have to be in what psychologists call a 'liminal state' as Jacob was when he dreamt, to for truths beyond the mundane to penetrate our minds – and we've been taught by our education to mistrust and question such revelation. It may be for all these reasons that we don't speak much of angels, and perhaps don't pay them much attention in the church today.

But there could be another reason, too. There have been times in history when people have been very fascinated by angels. They have been seen as standing in a mediating position between us and God; and yet our faith tells us that through Christ we can approach God as our dear Father without need of any other mediator. In other words, we shouldn't give them so much attention that they get in the way of our

relationship with God. *Christ* is our ladder to heaven - not the angels. This is why, I think, in our Gospel reading we were told that even the angels of God ascend and descend upon the Son of Man.

And there's something else as well- the very classification of angels into a hierarchy of ranks, which happened early in Church history, drawing upon the different language used about them in the Bible and in other writings - Cherubim, Seraphim and Thrones; Dominions, Virtues and Powers; Principalities, Archangels and Angels – has encouraged in some periods of history not only undue speculation about the angels, , but also a magical frame of mind and indeed (for example in the 16th and early 17th century), actual magical practice. Magic is fundamentally the desire to understand how power is distributed in the universe, and by occult means, how to make that power work to your own advantage. Invoking angels of different ranks and names could all too easily turn into trying to make them subject to human desires. Magic is fundamentally different from faith. Faith stands in awe of the invisible world, and seeks to find *God's* will – not ours – within it. Whatever we do or do not know about angels, and any distinction there may be between

them, the fundamental statement of faith is that they are *God's* servants – his ministers. Where they touch our history, they work for our benefit and our greater understanding of God, because he bids it – not because we can exercise any control over their actions. This is why we need gently to point out to our contemporaries who are fascinated by angels, that God as we know him in Christ really needs to be part of the picture – indeed, the central and most important part, the key to understanding what angels are all about.

This leads me to my final point – the one which makes the feast of the angels a suitable one for celebrating our human ministry and service of God. I, for one, having little awareness or sense of the angels (although Malcom and I do say every night before we go to sleep the old Compline prayer which asks God to send them to us, to preserve us in peace) – but, nevertheless, I've never seen, heard or been personally aware of an angel. And yet I do say to myself –and to you, if you're like me – that *whatever* angels are, however they fit into the universe of things – all we're told about them points at least to this truth: that the world by our faith is much bigger and more mysterious than we can imagine. It's not impossible to believe in invisible

powers at work in the spiritual realm, and it may make a lot of sense to do so. The important thing is that they, like us, are created by God, and what we try to do for him, however feebly – our ministry in this life, whether in church activities or in the Monday to Friday world – is played out in concert with other, invisible forms of ministry and service, which may go way beyond our understanding or imagining, and yet be aiding us, and making what we do more fruitful than we can ever realise. This is the sense in which I believe our Collect or special prayer for this day fits very well with the theme we have taken in making this 'Ministry Sunday'. So, let me end again with this collect:

*Everlasting God,
You have ordained and constituted the ministries of
angels and mortals in a wonderful order:
Grant that as your holy angels always serve you in
heaven,
So, at your command,
They may help and defend us on earth;
Through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.*