

St Michael and All Angels

Getting Real About Angels.

Angels. Pretty little things, aren't they? Very popular, too, these days. Not just on our Christmas cards and Christmas trees, but out there in the gift shops and garden centres. Angels have made a come-back in this age of pseudo spirituality and new age mysticism, even popping into our language quite regularly. Have you noticed how people talk about their 'guardian angels', whether or not they subscribe to a particular religious tradition? And we've had those lovely TV shows and films, where angels appear as everyday people, taking care of people in difficult life situations.

For Christians, probably where we most remember angels are in the Christmas stories: angelic hosts singing and praising God, with glory shining around them.

And then there's the other sorts of angels – the less publicised and less popular: the more scary ones, when you dig further in the Scriptures. In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, these angels are often rather terrifying beings; great beasts, living creatures, flying serpents burning with flames. We don't hear too many readings in our Sunday lectionary, like today's, that show that other side of angelic forces: "Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back".

And if you thought that the Archangel Michael was in serious pitched battle with that dragon and his band of evil angels, that's almost a playground tiff compared to the theologians' battles over how to interpret angels and all things supernatural and dark.

Clement of Alexandria, at the end of the second century, writes: "the spiritual man prays in the company of angels....and he is never out of their holy keeping. Although he prays alone, he has the choir of the holy ones standing with him." Holding hands with Clement's sentiments, stands the great twentieth century theologian Karl Barth. His theology of angels holds that they are crucial actors in the biblical narrative – they are agents of God's will and work; they are witnesses and messengers, preceding the revelation and doing of God's will on earth, accompanying it as faithful servants of God and humankind, and victoriously warding off the opposing forces of chaos.

Then there's the other theologians, strongly opposing the existence of angels, indeed anything supernatural. One in particular is Barth's contemporary, esteemed Protestant theologian Rudolph Bultmann: "Heaven and angels", he says "belong to those parts of the bible that need to be demythologised". Bultmann isn't going to have a bar of supernatural entities. In fact, he declares the NT to be largely myth: the pre-scientific world's way of attributing natural events to supernatural causes. And further into the twentieth century, it's become part of popular preaching to say that angels and demons, and the battle between darkness and light, good and bad, are all a matter of psychology, metaphor at best, a war within each one of us; a host of personal and societal woundings internally competing for domination of our souls. So – out there in the land of mighty theological thinkers, there's a whole spectrum of belief and doctrine. The Scriptures themselves don't give us a lot of detail about angels, although they're mentioned over 300 times (some poor person has actually gone through and counted this!). The word "angel" of course, comes directly from the Greek :angelos", meaning "messenger", and it's as messengers of God's will and purposes that the angels are most strongly presented. In the biblical texts angels are

seen to carry out a variety of functions: they worship and praise God, they reveal and communicate God's will; they guide, protect, provide, deliver, strengthen and encourage, and care for people at the time of death. They are created by God, before the world was created, and have intellect, emotions and will; and they are genderless. When I began my thinking and my reading for this sermon, I realised how little I'd thought about angels. They were just there – out there as part of that “heavenly host” of the unseen world; and probably largely mythical. Yet angels, and that invisible world populate our liturgy. As we do every Eucharist in a myriad of statements, we affirm our belief in that unseen world, present with us, heaven and earth drawn together around the banquet table of our Lord: in the Great Thanksgiving Prayer, we hear – I say – “with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven”; in the Creed, we say “We believe in one God ...maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen”; our confession is sometimes introduced with the words “we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses”. Clearly the Anglican Church has an assumption of an unseen world and of angels and archangels, if not a developed doctrine.

So – where do we go with this? Should it really matter to us whether angels exist or not? I think it does matter. And why?

Clement of Alexandria and the Church Fathers of his time would say: they matter because their presence tells us there's more to life than this earthly existence. We're not alone.

Karl Barth would answer: if God exists as “other” to us, why not angels as “other” also. And without angels, God himself would not be revealed and perceptible.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, adds his response: “If we try to rationalise all this away, we miss out on something vital to do with the exuberance and extravagance of the work of God, who has made this universe not just as a theatre for you and me to develop our agenda.....”

And the Scriptures –our primary authority – in the reading from Revelation today, tell us it is angels, led by the Archangel Michael, who cast Satan from heaven, securing the ultimate triumph of good over evil (Rev 12:7-12). There is more to life – to our lives – than what we do here in our visible and experienced world. Life – all creation - is caught up in a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil, and Christ is at the centre; and this whole battle is won by Christ through his triumph over death.

But the cosmic importance of these angelic roles does not diminish their concern for humanity. Jesus tells of how the angels rejoice over penitent sinners—indeed, over just ‘one sinner who repents’ (Luke 15:10)—and, of course, it is angels who announce the respective births of John the Baptist and Jesus, passing on ‘good news of great joy’ (Luke 2:10), even to the lowly shepherds who labour by night. The angels are presented to us in the Gospels being there with and around Jesus at the pivotal points of his life: heralding his birth, ministering to him at crucial times –in the wilderness, in the garden of Gethsemane, and announcing his resurrection.

In Scripture, then, angels are *for* us precisely to the extent that they are *other* than us. And that, I want to suggest, is part of the good news. Even among created things, human beings do not have the last word. There is a kingdom that we do not rule, a realm that lies beyond our mastery. And yet, it is one that still reaches out to us, drawing us, if only we will let it.

Ultimately, then, what we read in the Bible, what we hear from the Church Fathers such as Clement, and from theologians like Barth and Rowan, is a much richer view of the cosmos. What we can begin to see is a world in which humanity is not absolute, but, rather, part of a network of created things, each of whom are to move as close to God as possible.

When I started my ponderings on angels for this sermon, my starting point was with the lens of theology and biblical inspection; as I've said, holding them "out there", at a distance, with some intellectual scepticism. They've winged in closer and more personal now: because they matter to how we live in this world and how we can see ourselves as part of God's cosmic plan. Angels matter not in just a grand theological sense, but because in their closeness to us, they offer hope and comfort. They are involved in the healing and redemptive work of God through Christ. The world isn't all that it seems; where we struggle, where we can't see the way forward, where we're broken and vulnerable, where we feel our lives offer unbearable pain, we're not alone. Not just God with us; not just angels in the form of ministering friends, but angels, in the unseen world around us, protecting, delivering, strengthening us.

For the last word, from Rowan Williams: "Round the corner of our vision things are going on in the universe, glorious and wonderful things of which we know nothing."