

Michaelmas 2019 – Stewardship

As we celebrate this ancient Feast of St Michael and all Angels, I have been reflecting on the place of angels within the western psyche. Despite a huge shift away from conventional religion, angels are still to the forefront of our language. One might say that they continue to wing their way into everyday life. We talk of people who are angels in the way they display compassion, hospitality or kindness. Nurses have had this epithet for many years. In many towns and cities within our nation we have ‘Street Angels’, who seek to help youngsters and others help when they appear vulnerable – these angels pick drunken people up out of the gutters and ensure that they are safe. When children or people die tragically, the word angel appears on bunches of flowers or other signs of remembrance.

Today’s celebration causes us to focus the picture more closely through the Scriptures. From beginning to end, the Bible is full of encounters with angels; from the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, where we hear of the fiery cherubim with a flaming sword guarding the way to the tree of life, to the Revelation of John the Divine, where we are given an ecstatic vision of the angels around the divine throne of God, (Rev 5: 11): *As I watched, I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures and the elders. Their number was ten thousand times ten thousand, thousands upon thousands.* In between these accounts we hear of numerous other encounters with these almost indefinable figures of light, from Jacob’s wrestling match, to the beautiful and affecting story of Tobit in the Apocrypha, where the Archangel Raphael accompanies Tobias and his faithful dog on his journeying. Within our worship we are encouraged every time we gather around the altar to praise God by joining our praise to the heavenly host: *‘Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we praise and glorify your holy name, evermore praising you and saying, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy. Lord’* – the Song of the Seraphim from Isaiah’s vision of the Divine Presence, which in turn inspired John in his Revelation.

Today, our Old Testament and Gospel readings are intimately linked by the way Jesus uses the encounter of Jacob at Bethel in his words to Nathanael. Jacob’s dream of a wondrous ladder reaching from earth to heaven, complete with angels ascending and descending identifies the place where he rests as Bethel – the House of God. Jacob utters the words, *‘How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’* In other words, the land on which Jacob rests will be a Holy Land – **The Holy Land** - because of this connection between earth and heaven. It is an ecstatic moment of religious identity tied to place.

John’s Gospel gives us a completely different take on this in the words of Jesus as he calls his first disciples. We are still in Chapter 1. The Great Prologue culminates when the Wisdom of God becomes the Word made Flesh – in our midst, within our humanity, experiencing every stage of our humanity. When Nathanael is first told of Jesus, he scornfully questions how anything good can come out of Nazareth. Yet this scorn is turned to puzzlement when Jesus calls Nathanael, *‘an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.’* John wants us to understand that he is being directly compared to Jacob – who is a flawed person – a trickster if ever there was one. Nathanael’s response is to use extravagant language about Jesus, before being brought right down to earth – *‘You’re saying this, because I saw you under the fig tree?’* – says Jesus. *‘You haven’t seen anything yet!’* (slight paraphrase!)

'Amen, amen, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.' This solemn pronouncement reveals several things. First, as I say, that in Jesus is to be found the fullest knowledge of the Divine Life which we are **all** invited to share. The focus of our Faith is in the person of Jesus rather than a holy land, and firmly rooted in the experiences of our own life. Thus Israel or even Nazareth become Cuckfield, Haywards Heath or wherever Christians encounter the Divine Love. Yes, Israel will remain important to people of Faith because it the place where God has been encountered through Salvation journey. However, we can meet the Risen Lord anywhere.

How do we share this message? How can we talk about what we know yet cannot see, what we perceive and cannot touch? Our society has become evermore impoverished in terms of questions of Faith. All must be ironed out within the confines of empiricism, which leads **us** to face embarrassment when faced by Biblical accounts of angels. Yet the truth is, that there are more things in earth and heaven than we will ever be able to appreciate or understand, let alone explain. I would like to think that within our experiences as human beings there are occasionally flashes of God's glory apparent in so many ways in both extraordinary and everyday occurrences. The poet Edward Taylor calls them 'heart-cramping melodies.'

You will wonder when I am going to talk about Stewardship. For a thousand years a church has stood here as a reminder to the community that in Jesus, the selfless Love of God accompanies us on every step of our journey. The world has never needed this knowledge as much as now. May I ask you to do two things as we consider how we might best serve God. **Firstly, please pray. Pray** for our own community here at Holy Trinity. **Pray** that we might always be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit on our mission to serve Jesus joyfully in all that we do. **Pray** that we may reveal to the wider community the grace open to all through Faith.

Secondly, give. Give of yourself, **Give** of your time and talents. Your church needs you! If you give financially, please consider the amount you give. If you give as much as you feel able to, thank you, thank you! We are so grateful for your sacrifice. If you can give more, that would be such a blessing to us. If you don't give regularly, please consider doing so. You will find details of our costs on the Stewardship Leaflet. It costs £570 per day, (£24 per hour) to keep our mission on the road. We are greatly blessed that we are able to undertake as much as we do through your generosity. Only minor amounts of giving are used on the building, and we have no major reserves. Please be assured that the roof appeal is separate from every day running costs.

Linked to our stewardship, on this day when we rejoice in the imagery of angels within our Faith, rejoice with them as we worship. And if you don't believe in them, then for Jesus' sake know that you are called to be one! In your prayer and giving be a healer, a proclaimer, a warrior against hunger, hopelessness and evil. Be a light bearer to the darkness within many areas of society. Do that for Love's sake and you will be a messenger of God, the bringer of good tidings, a lover of God's people, and indeed of all people. You will be a sign of the Love revealed in its fulness through the one who draws heaven to earth, and earth to heaven – Jesus Christ, our Lord. There can be no greater privilege.



Bartolomé Bermejo - Saint Michael Triumphs over the Devil - 1468 (National Gallery, London)

Genesis 28:10-17

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a ladder^[a] set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And the Lord stood beside him^[b] and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed^[c] in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' ¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

Revelation 12: 7-12

⁷ And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸ but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹ The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,

‘Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,^[a]

for the accuser of our comrades^[b] has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.

¹¹ But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

¹² Rejoice then, you heavens
and those who dwell in them!

But woe to the earth and the sea,
for the devil has come down to you
with great wrath,
because he knows that his time is short!’

John 1: 47-end

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ ⁵¹ And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you,^[m] you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’