

# Michael and all angels – 29 September 2024

## Message – God's messengers

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Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, may we share the message of your love with all the world. **Amen.**

I must confess to being ambivalent on the topic of angels. There are Christians who, so far as I can tell, are quite normal and yet who claim to be able to see angels. They predominantly find them comforting. Many people find comfort in the notion of a guardian angel. Yet the common response recorded in the bible to seeing an angel is terror.

Whether we believe in angels seems to have no obvious effect on our faith so why, even though they are entirely biblical, do we celebrate St Michael and all angels.

Within the Bible there are two varieties of angel. Angel primarily means messenger and the first variety of angel we come across are the messengers of God that appear in the book of Genesis. There is some ambiguity in the Hebrew and at least some of the references to the angel of Yahweh appear to be speaking of God. Most obviously when Hagar meets the angel of Yahweh and says, *'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?'* (Gen 16:14)

With the editing of the book of Genesis, it is possible that *'the angel of'* is a later insertion or conveyed the real presence of God and so we have several encounters with God even though elsewhere we are told that no one can see the face of God and live.

This immediately brings to mind the words of Christ,

*'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14.9).* We are left with something of a puzzle and we are perhaps limiting the ability of God to appear as God chooses.

The second kind of angel are the heavenly hosts that worship God. These appear only to enter into Jewish thought after the southern Kingdom is exiled to Babylon and they mix with other cultures. The heavenly host are found in the visions of the prophets, particularly Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. Perhaps for all of us there is a desire to know what heaven is like though surely in the life the home of the infinite God is beyond our comprehension.

The Book of Enoch, considered canonical by only Ethiopian Jews and Christians, contains a considerable expansion of the understanding of Angels, and many copies of it were found among the Qumran scrolls, though not grouped with the scriptural scrolls.

For the most part, the New Testament reflects the understanding of Angels that is found within Hebrew Scriptures. The writers refer to angels as God's messengers and the heavenly host. There are just four places in the letters that may acknowledge the more developed descriptions of the book of Enoch (Jude 1:14-15, Heb 11:5, 1 Peter 3:19-20, 2 Peter 2:4-5).

The focus of the New Testament is always on the good news brought to us in the life of Christ, so angels are always secondary and serving this purpose. And I am still trying to see the point of thinking about angels, God's messengers.

The choice of gospel reading today is perhaps not the first one that would have come to the minds of most of us. John

makes fewer references to angels than the other gospels. For the others, Christ will return with a host of angels and angels walked with Christ through his life. So, what are we to make of John's image of *'angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'* (Jn 1.51)

John is covering a wide range of Christological bases in this passage. Jesus is *'him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophet wrote'*, *'the Son of God'*, *'the King of Israel'*, and *'the Son of Man'*. And, as we heard *'you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending'* upon him, reminding us of Jacob's vision of the ladder extending from heaven (Gen 28:10-19), Jesus is being portrayed as the mediator between God and humanity. And, this is only chapter one of John's gospel!

In the revelation of Christ, it would seem that angels are largely redundant. They are now descending upon him and we have direct access to God, not just to God's messengers. Where Jacob was given the vision that he would be the founder of a nation, Jesus of Nazareth knew that he was the founder of a new nation. Jacob was told that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed, Jesus was making this a reality.

All of which begs the question, 'in what way are all the families of the earth blessed through Christ?' If we look at the global church it is at times hard to discern how it is a blessing to the world. There is a heady mix of good and bad that has been done in the name of the church.

At present, with the Royal Commission of enquiry into abuse in care we are very aware of the failings of the

church. As we look through history, we can see the numerous failings of the church. Any good student of the birth of the Anglican church will be very aware of the faithful Christians who were put to death, both Catholic and Protestant, as our part of the church was brought to life. How can this be the case for a faith that is centred around the life of the Servant King who died to save us all and who proclaimed a path of sacrificial love.

It seems that we are still in need of God's messengers. Yet, as Jesus has pointed out in the parable of the tenants, we have been sent many messengers and in one final attempt God has sent His Son (*Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19*). So, who will be the messengers of today? It is of course everyone who follows the example of Philip and shares their discovery of the one sent by God.

The Kingdom of God starts with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It can be argued that, in the book of John, we have a realised eschatology. That is to say, the Kingdom of God has arrived, that in some sense the end times have started. However, when we look around the world, we can see this is not wholly true. Yet, when we look at the lives of individual saints, we can see something remarkable is possible, in their lives the Kingdom of God is made real and visible.

Christians have long debated the nature of the end times. There are those who look at the climate crisis and wonder if these are the inaugural signs of the end times. However, such a view does not hold true to the complexities of our scriptures. John's gospel predominantly conveys that the Kingdom of God is now with us.

St Paul, always able to make us think, suggests both the now and the not yet. We need to live with the belief that the Kingdom of God can be made real in our lives while the Kingdom of God is, and is not, all around us.

As the first letter of John points out, if we love God whom we cannot see, we necessarily love our neighbour whom we can see (*1 John 4:20*) and we, from our wealth, will help meet the physical needs of our neighbour (*1 John 3:17*).

This vision for the Kingdom of God, alive in the life of every follower of Jesus of Nazareth, has the power to transform the world. It has the power to make us a people through whom God blesses all the earth.

We have spent the last four weeks thinking about creation and our need to care for God's wonderful bountiful home for us. But it does not stop there. We are blessed in many, many, ways. God's greatest messenger has shown us a better path to follow, one in which all people can flourish.

It seems that we are called to be the messengers, *aggelos* of God today. For most of us our haloes seem to be a little thin. St Michael may be an odd saint to celebrate but we celebrate the lives of the saints to be reminded of all we are called to be. Today, we are reminded that we are to be God's messengers to all the world.

Amen. Amen.