

St Michael and all Angels
Gloucester Cathedral, 2022

Revelation 12:7-17
John 1:47-end

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

‘And war broke out in heaven.’ I am struck every year on this feast day of St Michael and all Angels by that opening phrase from our first reading. ‘And war broke out in heaven’. Heaven - which most of the rest of the time our tradition encourages us to imagine as a place of tranquillity and beauty, of peace and eternal joy. And yet ‘war broke out in heaven.’ We hear this extraordinary account of the Dragon, who is also named in this account with both of the most frequently used names for him: the Devil, and Satan - this account of his rebellion, defeat, and casting out, casting down. And if you start to find this homily tedious, flip to the back of the order of service where there is an image, taken from one of our illustrated bibles in the cathedral archive, of Satan being bound by ‘the angel from heaven’.

And in the back of the order of service there is a second image, this time of one of the seven angels showing St John - who of course was the recipient of this extraordinary Revelation with which the Canon of Scripture closes - the heavenly city, a vision of that peace, and order, and holiness that is our usual understanding of the destiny of the elect. Of those who spend their eternity in the presence of God. Two really striking images, which really map very well onto our two readings. This extraordinary and rather alarming account of the casting out of Satan from heaven, and then Jesus’s promise to Nicodemus that amongst the greater things that he, as a disciple of Christ will

see, is ‘heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

An image of war between the light in the darkness, and a promise of a vision of angels connecting heaven and earth.

We could have quite a lot of fun talking about whether we believe in angels. I mean whether we believe in anthropomorphic fluttering beings with wings and whatnot. And we could have quite an interesting time talking about whether we believe in the devil. Again, I mean whether we believe in an actual beast or person with horns and tail. We won’t have that conversation, but there’s a huge amount of really interesting stuff written which I can point you towards if you’re interested.

Instead I’d just like to draw together briefly the two key truths that I think this Feast Day is probably trying to remind us about. And it’s worth noting this is a very ancient Feast Day. For the first eight or nine hundred years of the Benedictine presence here in Gloucester today would have been kept as the Feast of Michael the Archangel. Then at the Reformation Thomas Cranmer renamed this feast Michael and *all* Angels, to draw in a wider host of angelic beings. And then at the reforms in the Roman Catholic Church in the middle of the last century they renamed the feast that of Michael, Gabriel and Raphael the archangels (and we sang about the three of them in our opening hymn, and the choir will sing about them again during Communion). Lots of angels, everywhere. This is clearly important to the church.

Let’s start with the gospel. Jesus is of course drawing on the image of Jacob’s ladder, from way back in Genesis, when he talks about angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Angels appear all through the Bible, and there are loads of

them in Genesis, and Jacob's ladder is of course an image that teaches us that there is a connection between heaven and earth. We are not separated. It is not the case that God and his crew have a jolly time up in heaven, while we slog along in misery and pain, and that there is nothing that we can do to alert God of our plight. Although it sometimes feels that way, and indeed some of the great mediaeval mystics describe how sometimes it can feel like we're shouting into a pillow and God can't hear us. We are assured that that is not the case. There are channels, there are conduits of grace between heaven and earth. God is interested in *you*. Heaven is interested in *you*. For you are, of course, being prepared for heaven. I didn't choose it tonight, but you remember the hymn, 'Nearer my God to thee', which has that line in it: "there let the way appear: steps up to heaven... Angels to beckon me nearer my God to thee."

So the first truth of Michaelmas is that heaven is already leaking into earth. You, and I, are already being divinized. Slowly, aching slowly sometimes, but we are being made holy. As we will sing in a few minutes, although we may fear that we are dark and cold, yet there is fire and light here. There are angels all around us. That is quite easy to believe in an extraordinary place like Gloucester Cathedral, the life of which I have just enjoyed for an unexpected and wonderful six months. And thank you for your company in this season of my journey. But even in places that aren't Gloucester Cathedral. Even in the darkness and cold, when we can't see the angels, they are there.

And we take our part in their ministry. Gregory the Great famously said that the word angel is much more like a verb than a noun, because it means messenger, evangelist. He says that the heavenly beings are always heavenly beings, they are only really *angels* when they are delivering messages.

And what the reading from Revelation is about more than anything else is a reminder that there is a battle to be fought. There really is good news to be told. That is what angels are for. But there *really is* darkness into which that good news must be proclaimed. There really is evil. Just watch the news. Just read the paper. And evil needs to be cast out. The darkness must be defended against. The world must be delivered. And the calling of the Christian, which we remember we are told right at the very beginning at our baptism: 'fight valiantly as a soldier of Christ against in the world and the devil', the calling of the Christian is to be angelic. To listen for the rustle of angels' wings, and to follow them into the darkness, confident that the battle has been won. Won in the darkness of Christmas night when the ladder between earth and heaven was never more vibrant and glorious, as eternity bent down to kiss the temporal world, and the sky exploded in *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Won in the darkness of Easter night, when the gates of hell are broken, and light flooded out of the door of the tomb.

But we are in the space in between *knowing* that truth, and the Kingdom finally *coming*. And the work of the church is to be angels. Holding the space until the Kingdom comes. Praying into the darkness, speaking into the darkness. Living lives of people who know they are surrounded by squadrons of the heavenly host, and therefore living lives of hope, of joy, of forgiveness - heralds of the Kingdom that is with us, though just out of sight.

There is a ladder set up *here*. There are angels ascending and descending *here*. There is work to be done *here*. There is a life to be lived *here*: the life of those who know the devil to be ultimately defeated, and who can therefore in grateful and hopeful response proffer "hearts and minds and hands and voices in our choicest psalmody".