

Lift This Mortal Veil of Fear

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The Feast of St Michael and All Angels | 29 September 2024

Readings

Genesis 28:10–17; Psalm 103:19–22; Revelation 12:7–12; John 1:47–51

I Did Not Believe Because I Could Not See

This feast is an important one in our church. Very few feasts are important enough, should they fall on a Sunday, to bump the appointed Sunday's business out of the way and assert themselves. The Feast of St Michael and All Angels, also called Michaelmas, is one of these. Historically, Michaelmas marks the end of summer. Autumn is showing its colours, school terms are back in swing, the harvest is brought in, and it's time to look toward preparing for winter.

In the liturgies today, our thoughts are directed not to the harvest or changing seasons—those come in a couple of weeks in Canada—but toward St Michael and all of the angels who praise and serve God without ceasing. One of my favourite features of this feast is that it reminds us that we humans are not the only event in God's creation. We are important, to be sure, but we are not the only thing happening. That line in the creed about God being the maker of all things, seen and unseen, suddenly sticks out when we're thinking about angels.

Sincere belief in angels and thoughtful conversation about them has become difficult in the last few centuries. Our culture has become increasingly interested in efficiency and production which are aided greatly by focus on empirical measurement. The "rational" world has little use for things unseen and, just like belief in God, belief in angels is out of fashion in many circles. Or, at least, belief in angels the way the Bible and our tradition talk about them has fallen out of fashion. Caricatures of angels—the fat little babies and harp-strumming recently-deceased people who have nothing to do with Biblical angels—are seen quite regularly in popular media. They're cute and cheery, not scary at all, and seldom have anything of any import to share with us. They have less to do with actual angels than Coca-Cola's Santa Claus has to do with Saint Nicholas. We've sanitized and commercialized these images that we label angels. Which is a shame, because the stories of real angels are much more interesting.

In the Light of the Stars

If Hallmark isn't publishing accurate information about Christian angels, then what should we know about Michael and his siblings? Michael is described in the Bible as an archangel and the captain of the angelic armies. They defeat the great dragon during the war in heaven in the Revelation.¹ The dragon is generally understood to be a form of Satan, the angel who once rebelled against God, hence why some depictions—like our own statue of St Michael—depict the defeated dragon as a man. Interestingly, the man is not dead, only subdued and trapped in a moment of agony, weighing his shame at defeat and his next move.

According to tradition, St Michael is also the angel who meets the souls of the dead and leads them to the gates of heaven. They also have a role on the Last Day, participating in the final judgement of creation and are often depicted holding a pair of scales as a symbol of this task. On occasion, artists have made interesting connections between Michael's role as a military leader and their role as a guide to the dead and tester of souls. In the chapel of St Michael's Mount in Cornwall there is a statue of Michael and Satan, much like ours. However, instead of the sword pointed at defeated Satan's neck, Michael has grasped it below the hilt, turning it into a cross. The other hand is extended to help Satan up from the ground. The agony on Satan's face, in this case, is not the shame of defeat, but their wrestling with the humility of redemption. It was, after all, pride that saw Satan cast out of heaven in the first place. God will not allow sin to persist, but it would seem there is grace, mercy, and redemption for even the most ancient and egregious of transgressions.

The other angels who are given names in the Bible are Gabriel and Raphael. Raphael appears only once, in the Book of Tobit, disguised as Azarias who helps Tobias on his journey. According to tradition, Raphael's principal work is as a healer and exorcist. The importance of angels and their work is evident in the Biblical story about the pool whose waters, when they stir, are said to heal all ills. The oldest manuscripts of John's gospel refer to the pool as a miraculous, natural phenomenon. In later years, a verse was added to suggest that the waters moved when an angel—presumed to be Raphael—descended to stir them.² The healing wasn't good luck but a direct intervention of God accomplished through the work of angels.

Gabriel, unlike Raphael, is very busy in the Bible. The word "angel" comes from the Greek word for a messenger and Gabriel demonstrates this like no other. Gabriel appears twice to Daniel,³ to Zechariah,⁴ and to Mary.⁵ Tradition holds that it was also Gabriel who appeared to St Joseph, to the shepherds in the fields, and who strengthened Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before Good Friday. (Muslims claim that it was Gabriel who appeared to Muhammed and revealed the Quran) In every case, Gabriel's appearance is a shock and comes with the most important news the recipient will ever receive. Encounters with angels are almost always upsetting and frightening. You and I might think of the Annunciation as a

¹Revelation 12:7–12

²John 5:3–4

³Daniel 8:15–17; 9:20–22

⁴Luke 1:18–20

⁵Luke 1:26–27

beautiful and serene event, but I suspect Mary's initial reactions were quite different to how we imagine them today.

Give These Clay Feet Wings to Fly

Angels were made to serve God and do so unfailingly. They were present when God created this world that we live in⁶ and they will be present on the Last Day in varied roles, like Michael weighing souls. Some angelic tasks are beautiful and joyous, like bringing healing, help, and good news such as the work of Gabriel and Raphael. Other angelic tasks are much less pleasant, such as the angel which brings death to the firstborn sons of Egypt at the Passover.⁷

Some angels are tasked with maintaining the constant worship of God in heaven. Some offer incense without ceasing⁸ and others sing God's praise from either side of the heavenly throne.⁹ One of the most important moments where humans meet with angels is in our shared worship of God. When we gather at the altar to share communion and we sing what is sometimes called "the unchanging hymn", that is the "Holy, Holy, Holy", we are joining in the worship not only of humans, but also of angels. Isaiah's vision of heavenly worship is the source of this hymn.¹⁰ For centuries, that short hymn was the most important part of the celebration of eucharist, even more than Jesus's words at the Last Supper. It is why the singing of that hymn is always prefaced with a statement about the voices of humanity joining those of heaven. "Therefore, with angels and archangels and all the heavenly host, we raise our voices and sing..." It is also why some people bow or kneel during or immediately following that hymn; the host of heaven has joined us in our worship and we are as close to the worship of heaven as we can be on this side of the Final Judgement.

There are many stories about how angels appear. In the Bible, we are not given descriptions of their physical appearances, other than when they are disguised as humans. We know that their presence is disturbing and frightening which is why, so often, they begin their news with something like "Be not afraid, I come with good tidings." In recent years, the internet has spawned a host of jokes about biblically-accurate angels, seizing on the descriptions from Isaiah's vision of wheels covered in eyes and awesome seraphim flying with their eyes and feet covered. Regardless of what they might look like, it is worth noting that angels are not like you and I. We show them in art as human-like, usually with wings or other distinguishing features. But angels are no more like humans than grizzly bears are. And though we know that angels are always serving God and that God has our best interests in mind in all things, our poor instincts tell us that the angel is even more frightening than the grizzly bear.

I suspect everyone here has slightly different feelings about St Michael and all of the angels. For some they are a great comfort and an important part of God's arrangement of creation, close at hand and, as

⁶Job 38:4-7

⁷Exodus 12:23-36

⁸Revelation 8:3

⁹Revelation 5:11

¹⁰Isaiah 6:3

St Paul says, “spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who inherit salvation.”¹¹ For others they are a relic of ancient cosmologies, safely forgotten by modern humanity. Whatever we make of angels today, this feast is a reminder that there is much more to God’s creation than we understand. Each scientific advancement seems to reveal a new world which, if we are curious enough, we might explore.

Our faith is one that deals with things unseen as a matter of course, though we each experience and understand this invisible world differently. I will leave you with an excerpt from Francis Thompson’s poem, *In No Strange Land*, reflecting on angels:

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars!—
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.
The angels keep their ancient places;—
Turn but a stone and start a wing!
’Tis ye, ’tis your estrangèd faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

My prayer is that Michael and all of the holy angels can be agents of wonder, awe, aid, and comfort to each of you, however they might appear. Blessed be God, in his angels and in his saints. Amen.

¹¹Hebrews 1:14