

Angels

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Everlasting God,
you have ordained and constituted the ministries
of angels and mortals in a wonderful order:
grant that as your holy angels,
always serve you in heaven,
so at your command,
they may help and defend us on earth.

Our text may be found in the 51st verse of the opening chapter of John's gospel:

'you will see heaven opened and the angels of God
ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'

Last Sunday was Michaelmas, the feast of St Michael and All Angels. I really wanted to preach on angels then but, because that Sunday was our Harvest Thanksgiving, I didn't. So today instead of preaching on one of the set texts – which is my normal practice – I'd like to use our time to consider briefly the subject of angels.

How many angels can you name ?

Gabriel – very active round the time of the conception and nativity of Jesus ?

Michael – captain of the heavenly host who features in Revelation and Daniel ?

Raphael – companion and guide of Tobias in the apocryphal book of Tobit ?

But have you heard of Uriel, mentioned as his guide in the apocryphal book of Enoch ?

(When I preached the sermon, Corrie Stein mentioned Lucifer, the light bringer, who fell from heaven and was renamed Satan or the devil)

The idea of angels, God's messengers – the word 'angel' comes from the Greek word *αγγελος* (aggelos), in Hebrew, *malak* – is an idea that has developed and changed over time. Some folk don't believe in them. Others, especially those much given to or taken with New Age Spirituality, invite you to 'frolic' with them ! We can certainly see in scripture a role allocated to them as a means to communicate the will of God to us; for example, in Genesis 22, the angel who stays Abraham's hand when he is on the point of sacrificing his son, Isaac, to God. There is the comforting notion that each of us has our own personal guardian angel – for example Psalm 91 v11, which the devil cites in one of his temptations of Christ in the wilderness, 'For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways' and Matthew 18 v10 which urges us to respect 'these little ones for . . . in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father'.

In Isaiah chapter 6 verses 1 – 3, the prophet has a vision of angels, seraphs, seraphim, around the throne of God. These angelic beings are awesome, terrifying. Of them, Isaiah writes: 'In the year king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon his throne high and lifted up, and his train filled the Temple. Above it stood the seraphim; each one had six wings: with twain he covered his face; with twain he covered his feet and with twain he did fly. And one cried to another and said, "Holy holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."'

Would you want to meet one of these beings on a dark night ? No wonder then the angel who appeared that night to the shepherds on the hillside outside Bethlehem should say **'Do not be afraid'** (Luke 2 v10).

Our patron saint, Bartholomew, was promised a vision of angels which is our text today: **'you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'** John refers to him by his given name at his circumcision, Nathaniel, a gift of God, rather than his surname, Bartholomew, son of Tolmai, which we find in the synoptic gospels and Acts. His friend, Philip has brought him to meet Jesus who makes a profound impression on him and his reaction is to recognise Jesus as **'the Son of God, the King of Israel'**. Jesus promises Nathaniel a vision which as faithful Jew steeped in the study of the Torah, he would recognise as something similar to that which Jacob experienced on his way to his uncle Laban when he stopped overnight at Bethel and had a vision of a 'stairway' to heaven up and down which angels were passing in both directions (Genesis 28 v10 - 17). When Nathaniel Bartholomew was privileged to experience the vision we are not told, though in my 'Bartholomew's Gospel', I place the event at his martyrdom when he passed from this world to the next. But the fact that he was going to be privileged to witness the underlying divine reality must have been a source of wonder and delight to our patron saint who was, by birth and education, a faithful and righteous Jew.

So what do you personally think of angels ? Awesome or awfully silly ? The stuff of myth or an ever present if largely unseen daily reality ? A source of comfort and encouragement or simply wishful thinking ? For my part, I do believe in angels

and I pray that we, like them, may serve the Lord our God through belief in his Son, Jesus Christ, as our Saviour, empowered by the active presence of his Holy Spirit in our lives.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

6th October, 2013

G: Sermons 28 : Angels

