



**A sermon for Choral Evensong at Wells Cathedral,
preached on Sunday 28 September by the Reverend
Mary Lewis, Priest Vicar**

For the Eve of the Feast of St Michael and All Angels

This afternoon we celebrate the Eve of the Feast of St Michael and All Angels. A festival for angels! But are they real? And if they are, what relevance might they have for our life and faith? On the outside wall of Coventry Cathedral there is an arresting and well-known bronze sculpture of the Archangel Michael by Sir Jacob Epstein called, *St Michael's Victory over the Devil*. The sculpture depicts the archangel Michael triumphing over a reclining devil. The scene symbolizes the victory of good over evil and represents hope for the future after the destruction of the old cathedral during WWII. It is a solidly earthly image that makes no apology for the unearthly scene that it represents - the war in heaven waged by St Michael against the fallen angels as described in the Book of Revelation.

We may question the existence of angels, or to put it another way; we may see no reason why angels should not exist, but we no longer seem to need them. Although at Christmas and Easter, on cards and in hymns, we enjoy meeting them in our imagination. And we don't have to go as far as Coventry Cathedral to find wonderful images of angels. We are surrounded by them in this cathedral, from the seraphs that surround Christ high up on the West Front, to the trumpet blowing angel in the Lady Chapel, to our very own St Michael slaying the dragon in the North Quire Aisle.

And our second reading from the Gospel of St Matthew refers to angels, where there is a warning from Jesus that it would be better to drown oneself than be a stumbling-block to a child because, "*In heaven their angels continually see the face of my father*". Is this passage evidence that each of us has a guardian angel? It is supported by Psalm 91 which we have just heard, where we read, "*He will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways*". There is no definitive proof for the existence of such spiritual guardians, but both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches teach that we do each have a guardian angel - an angel whose task it is to watch over us, through waking and sleeping and the long ages of time.

But how can we talk about angels in our very materialistic culture, in which our default position is that, if something can't be quantified or scientifically proven, it doesn't exist? Yet, the church still celebrates this feast, and Cranmer retained a Collect for it from the Sarum Missal, in which we hear of the wonderful order of the angels and that as they serve God in heaven, so they may help and defend us on earth.

What was the order of angels that the Collect speaks of? In the 5th century, a book called *The Celestial Hierarchy*, by Pseudo-Dionysius, identified three orders of heavenly beings. The highest order of Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones are described as being entirely turned towards God and are on fire with the love of God, praising him without ceasing. The next order down, the Dominions, Virtues and Powers have a special mission to govern the universe. Finally, the Principalities, Archangels and Angels engage with human affairs, especially acting as messengers between us and God. In these hierarchies, we see an ordered world where every being has a unique place and a particular duty in their relationship with God.

Jesus's life was surrounded and supported by angels. There is the Archangel Gabriel who appears to Mary at the annunciation and the angels round the empty tomb at the resurrection. Think of Jesus' forty days in the desert. St Mark writes, *"He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."* Think of Jesus in Gethsemane. The disciples had either deserted him or fallen asleep, and so he prays, as we hear from St Luke, *"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine". Then an angel appeared to him, coming from heaven to give him strength.*" Alone, in the darkness of that terrifying night, when no human being was able or prepared to stay with him, an angel comes to strengthen him.

So it is almost certain that spiritual beings do exist and interact with us. What form might their interaction take? John Donne, around 1600, writes, "So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame, Angels affect us oft, and worshipp'd be". "Oft", indeed? Perhaps we do entertain angels unawares, as Hebrews suggests, "Forget not to show love unto strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares". Haven't we all had an experience of being helped in a difficult situation, even saved from an accident, by someone who appears unexpectedly and then disappears - an ordinary person - or perhaps not so ordinary.

Angels may play a far greater part in our lives than we are aware and not simply as helpful messengers and guardians. For to return to the thought of St Michael, is to find a being who is fighting for Christ, battling against the reality of evil. How is this possible? We know that God created beings with the freedom to refuse his will for we have that freedom too. Without freedom, the love and

service of God, would be worth precisely nothing. Spiritual beings must be able, like us, to choose false paths that exclude the love of God. And so, the tradition endures of the archangel Michael and his host in battle against Satan and his fallen angels, who seek to destroy life and all creation. (Rev 12.7-12)

And just as the faithful angels who help us may be disguised, so too, may be the fallen angels who have refused God's will.

One of the greatest ironies is that evil is powerless unless it hides within what seems good. Unattractive tempters will not be tempting. St Paul warns us in his Second Letter to the Corinthians that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. (2 Cor 11.14)

To suggest that the evil and suffering we see in the world today is initiated by Satan and his hosts, who may be able to enter into the minds and hearts of people unawares, may be a step too far, although aspects of the internet, the development of Artificial Intelligence and the dark web, enabling ransom attacks, and the tragic conflicts happening now in the world, may make this proposition appear not so far-fetched.

Christ has won the victory over sin and death and our faith in him is paramount. May we always turn to the light of Christ and seek to do his will, working to relieve suffering and to bring hope and peace into the world and perhaps also to have space in our thoughts and prayers for those angels who seek to serve us and God's plan of salvation and who give us encouragement and protection through all our days. Amen.

The Reverend Mary Lewis
Priest Vicar

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