

Angels

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Michael and All Angels—29 September 2024

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Ezekiel 1.4-12; Psalm 138; Revelation 12.7-12a; John 1.45-51

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ has been proclaimed. Let us now hear his voice speaking to us, and not that of the Speaker. Lord God, quieten our hearts and minds to hear You.

We were on holiday some time back and Sylvia said to me, have you ever heard of the Angel of Mons? Being the repository of all knowledge, I said, "Yes, I've heard of it, but I don't know the finer details." Now please note that I said I was the repository of all knowledge, unlike Tony Abbott who once declared he was the suppository of all knowledge.

With my vast computer skills, I managed to look it up. Briefly, the British Army was retreating from the Germans at Mons in France on 26 August 1914, greatly outnumbered. At around 9pm on a fine evening, three golden figures appeared in the sky: one huge figure, two lesser figures, one each side, all with wings. And their faces couldn't be discerned and under the feet of each of the three was a huge star. The Reverend A. A. Boddy, Vicar of All Saints Sunderland, was serving as chaplain at the time. He followed up after the war ended and found that there was much discussion in Berlin. The Germans had failed to carry out orders and when censured, they declared that they had gone forward but found themselves absolutely powerless to proceed and that their horses had turned sharply around and had fled like the wind, and nothing could stop them.

When I was at college, one of my fellow students preached on angels at St John's Reid. He went around the church pointing out the little ones in this stained-glass window—that one over there and that stained glass window, the little one in the window partially covered by the choir gallery. Then he spoke about angels. Later in the morning, we went back to college for what was known as sermon critique. This was where they tore you to pieces for suspect theology, good theology, for telling jokes, for not telling jokes, for having a scowl on your face as you spoke about the love of God or for smiling when you went talking about sin and Satan, for being nervous or being overly confident. When we started to critique Paul's sermon, I asked, "Don't you like big angels?" Because in the 20-odd he'd found, mainly little ones, he'd overlooked a huge seven- or eight-foot one in the main central window up front at St John's.

Today we celebrate Michael and all angels. Do you believe in them as a reality or only tooth fairy? What do angels do? Angels are the messengers of God. Let's look at the scriptures because, as Billy Graham said, our frame of reference must be the scriptures as our supreme authority on all subjects.

Old Testament first: notice that angels aren't mentioned anywhere in the six days of creation. It's probable that God created the angels before the creation of the heavens and earth in Genesis 1. We're also given a clue in Job 38.4-7. This whole chapter is the Lord's answer to Job when he asked, "Where was Job at the formation of the earth?"

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Tell me, if you understand: "Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know. Who stretched a measuring line across it. On what were its footings, or who laid the cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and the angels shouted for joy?"

So obviously there were angels at the creation of the earth. The Bible doesn't tell us this outright but perhaps it's assumed by the appearance of Satan in the Garden of Eden. Who is this evil being and how did he get there? When and how did he fall out of God's favour? Now we mightn't know the details of how and when, but we are told in Revelation 12.7-9, that there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down and that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan who leads the world astray—he was hurled to the earth and his angels with him.

So now we see that there are God's angels and Satan's angels. Angels are spiritual beings separate from God and, unless they are fallen, are of unquestionable integrity, goodwill and obedience to him.

Angels appear to us as bearers of God's specific commands and tidings. They're mentioned thirteen times in the Old Testament and 29 times in the New Testament. We seem only to have the names of five: Gabriel, Michael, Raphael and Uriel and Abaddon, who is the angel of the bottomless pit, mentioned only once in Revelation 9. Gabriel stands in a very honoured place. It was he who interpreted Daniel's vision of the ram and the goats in Daniel chapter 8. It was he who announced the birth of John the Baptist to his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. And it was Gabriel who announced the coming birth of Jesus to Mary. In all instances he was received with feelings ranging from absolute terror to Mary being a little afraid—always seen as a messenger of God. Michael, the archangel, is portrayed in Jude 9 as the protector of Israel and again in Daniel 12.

Angels were at work all through the scriptures. Remember also Balaam's donkey was more aware of the presence of the angel of the Lord than Balaam himself was. When three "men" appeared to Abraham to announce the birth of Isaac, two of those men were angels, as we are told in the next chapter.

Those people who talk about personal guardian angels may not be too theologically unsound, because as we look in the New Testament, we see this concept sharpened. From Matthew 18, when Jesus was asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven", said a little child in their midst. And at the end of his reply in verse 10 he said, "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones, for I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven."

Remember when Peter escaped from prison in Acts 12: he went to John's mother's house, knocked on the door and the servant girl answered the door, shut it in his face, left him standing there, and told the other disciples who told her she was out of her mind. When she kept insisting that it was Peter, they said, "It must be his angel." The ancient mind seemed able to accept the reality of angels.

Little seems to have been attempted by way of direct description of the angelic form. There are hints of lustrous countenance and apparel, of awesome and other worldly beauty. That's why Sylvia calls me her angel. Christian art has attempted to express it in its own way. And we do have one description from Matthew 28.2, after the resurrection. There was a violent earthquake for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were as white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The passage speaks of the reality of angels, gives his appearance, and that he gave the guards something to think about for the following week.

Jesus himself received ministry from angels on several occasions. After the temptation of Jesus in the desert, we are told that when the devil left him, angels came and attended him.

Jesus, when praying on the Mount of Olives just before his arrest with his spirit in great anguish, an angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.

On the night Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, one of Jesus' companions cut the ear of one of the servants of the high priest. Jesus said to him: "Put your sword back in its place for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"

Numerically, a legion was a division of Roman soldiers comprising between 4,000 and 6,000 men. So, twelve legions were a lot of angels that he could have summoned.

There seems to be no doubt in scripture as to the reality of angels. Jesus himself believed in them and many people, through extraordinary circumstances of life, have been ministered to by angels. I end with three true modern stories.

Sylvia and I entertained an Anglican Franciscan priest one night. He was telling us that one night over in the Solomon Islands, he was out for dinner in an enormous mansion and the subject of angels came up. He said that he didn't believe in angels. At precisely that moment, a large heavy chandelier came crashing down on the table. He said that the chandelier had been there for over 100 years and, on examination there appeared nothing wrong with the chains, woodwork or wiring or the supporting beams. He felt that he should rethink his theology on angels.

Gladys Aylward, who wrote the book *The Little Woman*, was an overseas missionary from England. She was out between two towns in China and had to camp out overnight. They had valuables with them, and it was known that where they were camping was infested with robbers. The night passed uneventfully, and they moved on to their hospital town the next day.

A little while later, the leader of the robbers came into the hospital with a broken leg. While he was in hospital, he said to the missionary, Gladys, that he'd seen her before, the night she'd camped out. He said that his band of robbers had watched them all night but didn't rob them because of the seven soldiers guarding them all night. When she returned on leave to England, she went to her parish and related the story. The parish prayer meeting on the night that she was camping out worked out that there were seven people attending that night and all were praying for her.

The rector of Neutral Bay some years ago told me this of his time in Glebe Parish in Sydney. One night he was getting changed into his jammies and there was a knock on the door. That usually happens. When he answered it, there was a little girl standing there who simply said, "Come with me, my mother's dying." Alan grabbed his home communion set, prayer book and followed her—after he'd changed from his jammies. Down the road, around a few corners, along a street, until the girl stopped and said, "She's in there," and disappeared.

Alan went in and in the front room there was a very, very sick lady in bed. They talked for a while and the lady said, "How did you know to come?" He replied, "Your daughter came and got me." She said, "Would you go into the next room and bring the photo that's on the mantelpiece?" He went and got the photo and brought it back to her, and she asked, "Is that the girl?" He said, "Yes." The sick lady said, "My daughter has been dead for 10 years."

The Lord is Spirit. Angels?