

'Of peace, worship and wonder' – A homily for Michael and All Angels

*Rank on rank the host of heaven,
spreads its vanguard on the way,
as the Light of light descendeth
from the realms of endless day,
That the powers of hell may vanish
as the darkness clears away.*

*At his feet the six winged seraph;
cherubim with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the Presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry -
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia,
Lord Most High. [The Liturgy of St James]*

Words about the heavenly host inform some of Christianity's most profound and beautiful hymns and liturgies, and yet hardly a word is said about angels nowadays, languishing as we are in a technological and flatly-scientific culture, devoid of imagination and creative mythology. But here we are on the Feast of Michael and All Angels, and I cannot help but direct our thoughts to these heavenly creatures.

The Scriptural understanding, deepened and invigorated by the medieval imagination, was not as embarrassed of angels as we might find ourselves to be. Indeed, their world was alive to these heavenly figures. But does any talk of angels require a retreat into pre-scientific understandings and literalistic interpretations of the subtle and the supernatural, or can we learn anything from the traditions that have long since shaped our Christian world?

It seems to me that consideration of the angels leads us in three main directions: (i) angels remind us that at its heart, the world is created for worship; (ii) angels reveal a world that is full of wonder and beauty, beyond technical control and categorization; and

finally, (iii) angels remind us that underneath human violence and cruelty lies a deeper reality of peace.

First then, angels remind us that at its heart the world is created for worship. Throughout the Eucharistic liturgies of East and West we find the beautiful words of the Gloria and Sanctus, calling us to worship: 'Glory be to God on High,' and 'Holy, Holy, Holy.' It shouldn't surprise us that these words are drawn from the hymns of angels found in the prophetic work of Isaiah and the Gospel of Luke. Wherever the angelic host is found, then soon can be heard the echoes of heavenly music, reminding us of our fundamental vocation, indeed, the vocation of the entire universe: the call to worship.

Kenneth Leech has this to say: *'The future of the Christian community in the twenty-first century depends to a large extent on the quality, authenticity and power of its liturgical life, its worship – its corporate life of penitence, lament, praise and glory. All Christian life begins in liturgy, in the act of worship.'* Leech goes on to say that worship isn't about relevance or utility, but instead is like poetry, stretching our human capacity for awe and wonder almost to its breaking-point. In all of this the angels point to a reality that is beyond ourselves, to a God who lifts our hearts and minds in dreadful wonder. This means for us, here this morning, that our worship must take us beyond a passive watching of priest-craft around the altar, and beyond being an audience. We must – each of us – approach the altar in fear and trembling, realising that we are before nothing less than the divine mystery itself.

Second, angels reveal to us a world that is full of beauty and wonder, beyond our technical control and categorization. Margaret Barker encourages us to think of creation as a multidimensional spider's web, with everything in a delicate and beautiful balance, in intricate relationship and interdependence. Angels remind us that our fundamental orientation towards creation should be that of respect, wonder and celebration. It is when we move away from this vision to that of utility and resource, seeing creation as nothing more than inanimate stuff for us to use as we will, that real difficulties arise.

Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher of the 20th century, said that the difficulty of modern life was that we had reduced all our relationships from being *I-Thou* relationships to becoming that of *I-It*. *I-Thou* requires a relationship of conversation, of dignity and respect; whereas an *I-It* relationship denies the other any sense of internal worth and reduces it into a thing to be exploited and used. Indeed, an *I-It* relationship turns out to be no relationship at all.

In this way, contemplating angels reminds us that our world is alive to us and alive to God, bursting with creative energy and delicate subtlety. Perhaps we should take a moment today to think about how we use the resources of our world, or how we relate to other people who make up our world. Are they only things that we can use to enhance or advance ourselves and our agendas, or are they people and things to treat with respect and dignity? Perhaps we need to remind ourselves of that multidimensional spider's web holding all things together in harmony and design and not be too quick to pull at the strings that keep us together?

Finally, angels remind us that underneath human violence and cruelty lies a deeper reality of peace. On an almost daily basis our senses are bombarded with images of violence, war, pollution and cruelty. The fundamental narratives of our world spiral ever downwards into ever more darkly cruel and destructive visions of human life. The 'War on Terror', the 'threat of Islam', 'religious fundamentalism,' 'global market meltdown,' 'chaotic natural disasters,' 'global pandemics,' and the like, splinter our human sense of belonging and trust, and strike at the heart of any hope for a shared future.

Today our international media coverage utilises such narratives to drown out any others that might speak of renewed hope, reconciliation and peace. It seems that good news is no news. But somewhere underneath this amplified voices of threat and nihilism, there comes the echo of angelic voices whispering 'peace, goodwill to all people.' We need only think of a small community of people visiting someone after a hip operation, or a local religious community preparing to provide care and support for those with dementia, a

group of interfaith leaders gathering to say prayers at Ground Zero after 09/11, or some neighbours delivering food parcels to a vulnerable person in lockdown.

It seems that our secular and materialist era demands stories that whittle away at human dignity and threaten despair. In such a context as this we need to train our ears to listen to the silent whispers of angels which speak of another story, a deeper narrative where instead of a God banished from the public arenas of our world, God is instead shown to be a key and decisive player. Indeed, each of us must ask ourselves whether we have banished God from our world, or whether we have the courage and imagination to believe that the beating heart at the centre of our world is one - not of violence - but of peace.

So then, as we begin to think about our celebrations of the Feast of St Michael and All Angels, let us remember that angels: (i) remind us that worship lies at the heart of creation; that (ii) angels reveal a world alive with wonder and beauty, a world to celebrate and to enjoy; and that, (iii) beneath the narratives of human violence and cruelty lies the divine whisper of peace. When we commit ourselves to these three truths, then we will find that – even without knowing it – we have been entertaining angels unawares. AMEN.