

St. Michael & All Angels (1 October 2023)

“Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.”

+In the Name...

What do you think of when you hear the word “angel”? Probably something with wings, I suspect. Do you think of Christmas decorations, perhaps? Specifically, the decoration you give pride-of-place to at the very top of the tree? Or do you think of those quintessential Baroque-looking cherubs? When I was of high school age, I remember the ever-popular “Love” stamps from the Post Office that usually were decorated with a cheeky cherub, apparently of the well-fed variety. If you would permit me to go even further afield, when I was a student at Carroll College, our mascot was the “fighting

saints”, represented by, you guessed it, a well-fed infant in a diaper with wings entirely too small to be used for flying, and a halo.

(Somewhere since graduation the diapered baby was replaced with a dog, yet inexplicably still maintaining the “fighting saint” moniker.

Perhaps because he is a St. Bernard...)

Regardless, it is likely hard for us to imagine these plump babies from postage stamps and Valentine cards fighting a war in Heaven, which is exactly where we join them at the beginning of St. John’s Revelation this morning. So what do we really know about these celestial beings? Well, first we have to decide on our sources of information. Christmas hymns contain a cornucopia of angel references, but the carols of our Anglican tradition might give us the impression that angels are only interested in the amount of snow produced in the northern hemisphere, or the habits of barnyard animals. Secular songs also like to include angels: Shelley Fabares’

“Johnny Angel” made it to the top of the charts. More recently, you might have been able to meet a perfect angel with Ed Sheeran, also a chart topper, but pop music does not seem a good source of theology.

I mentioned postage stamps earlier, but how does the church portray angels in art? We have no shortage of them here at St. Mark’s, especially if you look at Fr. Geiser’s Ascension above the high altar.

As a child, I thought angels must be female, given that they seemed to wear dresses. As I grew older, I learned they were robes, but even in Fr. Geiser’s art they are all rather androgynous. Far from that being irreligious, it puts into art form what the Church has told us about these Heavenly creatures: they are pure spirit. There are three types of created beings: those that are purely spiritual, such as the angels.

There are those that have both a spiritual side and a physical side, such as human beings. Then there are those that have only a physical side, such as animals. Because an angel does not have a physical body,

it does not have a gender. It may take whatever form it wants, or rather whatever form allows it to do the job for which it was chosen. Our artwork reflects what we know: the word “angel” means messenger. A messenger needs to be able to move around quickly, so our artwork frequently shows angels with wings. If an angel is going to go to war, it would be expected that the angel would be large.

The Church tells us that God created angels before He created mankind. As there would have not been anyone yet for them to message, they assisted in the worship of Almighty God. Like mankind, angels possess freewill. Because of that, they have the ability to make the wrong choice, as did Lucifer, or Satan, or the devil, or whatever we choose to call him. Scripture tells us of nine choirs, or ranks, of angels: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, principalities, powers, virtues, archangels, and angels.

While the Feast we celebrate today includes “all angels” in its title, Michael is one of the four archangels. Two are explicitly named in the Holy Scripture: Michael and Gabriel. Gabriel, you will remember, is the archangel who announced to Our Lady that she would carry the Son of God in her womb. The other two archangels are Raphael and Uriel, who are found in the deuterocanonicals of the intertestamental literature, commonly called the apocrypha. (It is likely sandwiched between the Old and New Testaments of your American Bible, or perhaps left out entirely.)

Our Collect from the beginning of this morning’s mass summarized the two main tasks of the angels: service of God in Heaven, and their help and protection of humans on earth. Of course, this second set of tasks would be of most interest to us! I should say something about the title “saint” here: normally the term “saint” means someone who the Church confidently proclaims is in Heaven.

In the Roman Church, there is a formal canonization process during which miracles are attributed to the deceased in question and after a detailed inquiry the dead person is proclaimed a “saint”. Anglicanism is less rigid, accepting those declared saints before the split in the 11th century between the Western and Eastern Churches, or those of our own tradition who are proclaimed as saints due to widespread acceptance, although these folks are generally referred to as “blessed”. Here “saint” is an honorific, really just meaning “holy”. Of course, angels are in Heaven, but they did not have to go through a canonization process in order for us to agree that they are there!

In the Medieval Church, Saint Michael had four main roles: First, he was the leader of the Army of God and the forces of Heaven as they triumphed over Satan and the powers of hell, as you heard read earlier in the epistle. His second role was as the Angel of Death: he came down from Heaven to give a soul another chance to redeem

itself before passing from this life into the next, thus frustrating the best efforts of the devil. In his third role, Michael would weigh each soul to see if it was worthy, hence him often being depicted with scales in artwork. If you have been to the Vatican, you may have noticed that Michelangelo painted Michael in this role on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. St. Michael's fourth role was to be a special guardian of both the chosen people of the Old Testament and also the Church. As such, he has been particularly revered by knights in military orders. For many years the Prayer of St. Michael was included at the end of mass. I taught in a Roman Catholic school for six years and it was used there frequently. You will find it in the St. Augustine's Prayer Book and other Anglo-Catholic devotional material.

Next Sunday we will have our blessings of the animals after both masses in honor of St. Francis of Assisi. That saint was especially devoted to St. Michael, and fasted from the Feast of the Assumption

on the 15th of August until Michaelmas. Some Franciscans still do that today and refer to it as St. Michael's Lent.

To give you an idea of the importance placed on his intercessions still today, a prayer to him is included in the Rite of Exorcism. While not something most of us will ever have any opportunity to be a part of thankfully, it does show Michael's prayers for humans are sought in the most dire of circumstances.

But to bring it back to a place accessible to us average folks, the Church teaches us that every person has a guardian angel. While the artwork sometimes borders on the corny, it should offer us some consolation that we always have an emissary of Heaven helping to watch out for us. I do not mean in a chaperone sense, but just given the craziness of our contemporary world it never hurts to have an additional set of eyes watching, not to mention an extra mouth to pray for us. May the dedication of those angels be an inspiration for us.