

## All Saints Bearsden

### St Michael and All Angels – 29 September 2024

***Readings: Genesis 28.10-17; Revelation 12.7-12; John 1.47-51***

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Mention angels and it's a fair bet that most people will start to think of beings in glittering white robes, with silver wings and playing golden harps.

We may have heard about the Archangel Michael or angels as messengers at least if not as warriors, but I remember that nervous clergy in my home parish of St Michael and All Angels in Southwick, Sussex, occasionally plumped for the easier option and talked about the life of the parish instead.

Try and look up something – anything – about angels and there isn't a great deal to go on. The memorable bits of scripture which seem to refer to angels picture them with blazing swords in their hands, or maybe we just think of them flapping down with a great rustling of feathers to have a chat with Mary, Jacob, or shepherds in the fields.

It's all a bit bizarre, isn't it. I mean it's quite easy to celebrate St Matthew's Day because we can be pretty sure that Matthew was a real person, a tax collector who left his work behind to be a follower of Jesus. Likewise we can relate to St Francis of Assisi, or St Patrick, or St Teresa of Avila, because something of their lives has been written down, they themselves have left us a legacy of thoughts and prayers.

But it's not quite so simple when we come to Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, Uriel or any of those other strange heavenly beings called angels. Which is odd really because the Bible speaks of angels continually. From the first book, Genesis, where we see an angel guarding the garden of Eden, right the way through to the Revelation to St John, where an angel is sent to show God's servant what must happen, there are plentiful references to angels.

The actual story of St Michael the Archangel is very dramatic in the book of Revelation. It's a cosmic, mythological battle between the forces of good and evil. So I wonder where we get the fairy tale image from. It is true that there are indeed places in the Bible where angels seem to be wearing shiny white outfits and they do seem to have wings, but this is often a symbolic description of

something that actually seems to be indescribable. Angels in the Bible certainly aren't portrayed as being pretty creatures – indeed when men and women see them it's not without a significant amount of drama attached. Think of Isaiah's vision in the temple, the experiences of Mary and Joseph, the resurrection, the release of Peter from prison....

In the Bible angels don't create giggles, they inspire awe. They appear again and again in many of the books of the Bible, and always bring with them mysterious suggestions of another life, eternity, another world.

Let's not forget that the word angel comes from the Greek *angelos*, which simply means messenger. And maybe we do need to remind ourselves that angels are God's messengers. You will appreciate I am sure that as a former journalist I am a big fan of angels, those who are sent with news to pass on to their audience. I don't know that we can rightly describe them as heavenly spin doctors, but they're certainly always there to pass on the message. Angels are there to proclaim God's will and plan to human beings.

Clearly angels have a position of particular responsibility and power – more than once in the Old and New Testaments Michael is described as a prince and archangel with very special authority.

In the life of Christ angels played an important part: an angel foretold his birth in a visit to Mary, they proclaimed the good news of his birth to shepherds, they ministered to Jesus in the wilderness and in the garden of Gethsemane, they witnessed his resurrection and they appeared at his ascension.

It's worth pausing here just to consider the names of the angels we do know about: there's Michael, a name which means "who is like God" – whenever a mighty deed is in question Michael is assigned so that by his actions and name it may be made known that no-one can do what God can do; throughout the centuries not least in this country there has been a strong devotion to St Michael. The famous Mont St Michel in Normandy commemorates an apparition of the archangel, while we mark St Michael's Day on September 29th because on that day a basilica was dedicated to him near Rome.

We can think of the archangel Gabriel, whose name means "Strength of God". It was Gabriel who announced the birth of Jesus to Mary, so he is remembered as telling of one who was not only lowly but also strong and powerful. Incidentally he is the patron of post office, telephone and telegraph workers, hence that old BT logo.

And then there's Raphael, whose name means "Healing of God". We find him mentioned in one of those apocryphal books between the Old and New Testaments and it was he who was sent by God to heal Tobias of his blindness. Many say that Raphael was the angel mentioned in John's gospel, who stirred the waters of the healing pool in Jerusalem. And of course the Guild of St Raphael today is still concerned with healing.

And there's the fourth archangel, sometimes known as Uriel – the name means "God is my flame" – regarded as an angel of wisdom, truth, and light.

So I think it's important that we do take the role of angels seriously, and don't just relegate them to children's books or – heaven forbid – to the top of our Christmas trees. We must surely believe that the work and ministry of angels, important throughout the scriptures, is still important today.

Just a couple more things about angels. We see angels as leading the way in worshipping God. Even the holy angels, who are closer to God than we are, recognise that God is to be constantly worshipped and adored. How often do we truly worship the Lord with all our hearts and minds and souls and voices? Yet the angels are bursting with praises: John wrote in Revelation, "I looked and I heard the voices of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand... In a loud voice they sang:

*Worthy is the lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise."*

Second I call to mind Coventry Cathedral, where on the outside wall there is a statue of St Michael, with wings outstretched and spear in hand he holds the devil at bay. It reminds us that evil is something very real and needs to be fought, but also that evil is a defeated foe thanks to the prevailing power of Christ.

If by thinking about angels we can be helped to recognise our own duty to worship Jesus as Lord, to fight the good fight, and that Christ's power has already won us the victory in the world, then I for one am prepared to take them seriously. Thinking about angels properly asks us to bring with us the weapons of justice and truth, of self-examination, humility and repentance, of fairness and respectful communion with others.

Remember what lies beyond the horizon, even though you can't see it now. Remember how the story ends. This remembrance will mark our struggle with peace, with confidence, with faith. And of course it can be very helpful indeed if we're willing to listen to the good news from the mouth of God's own messengers.