

Sunday 29th September 2019, All Saints High Wycombe: St Michael and All Angels

Angels are ubiquitous in our cultural consciousness. Even today, in our ostensibly secular age, one in six atheists purports to a belief in angels. Shakespeare refers to angels over one hundred times across his complete works. They feature heavily on our Christmas cards, and on our tomb stones. If I asked you to draw me a picture of an angel, I reckon I could quite safely predict what the image would look like. White clothes, pale skin, blond hair, female, shining bright with wings and a halo. Angels are also frequently invoked when we talk about death, for example, it's common to hear phrases such as "heaven needed another angel" when attempting to offer an explanation for why a person has died. But how helpful to our spirituality and our worship are these ethereal, pre-Raphaelite images? In what sense, and to what extent, are these images true? Could it be that our cultural construction of angels is actually quite dangerous, and quite damaging?

We have gone quite wrong in our cultural understanding of angels. For a start, angels in the bible are almost exclusively men, with names like Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel. Our feminization of angels is symptomatic of Western culture's historic refusal to see women as physical beings: virtuous women, especially in Victorian times, were encouraged to be passive, almost bloodless. It also would take a lot more than this sermon slot to unpack the highly problematic cultural amalgamation of whiteness with goodness: there are complex historical, post-colonial and sociological reasons why angels are always portrayed as having very pale skin, but the angels we read about in the bible are bright white and dazzling because they are shining with light. There is no prioritisation of a particular skin tone in the bible, which is of course a middle eastern text. Most of the angels we read about in the bible don't even have wings! Indeed, in the Daniel extract, some of the heavenly beings he encountered take on a human form.

If we turn to our bible readings for this evening, from Daniel 10 and Revelation 5, we see that the biblical characterisation of angels is very different from how we typically imagine them in Western culture. For a start, they are not fluffy and comforting. They are terrifying! In the extract from Daniel, we read that Daniel's experience of a heavenly being in his vision is so terrifying that all of his strength leaves him, and his complexion becomes deathly pale. Even the people around him who don't see the vision are overcome with trembling, and they run away and hide. When the heavenly being speaks, Daniel face plants onto the ground! Similarly, in Revelation, the angel is described as "mighty" and has a "loud voice".

Angels in the bible are most prevalent in the apocalyptic genre of literature, which flourished in late antiquity, especially from about 200 BC to 200 AD. Both *Daniel* and *Revelation* can be described as apocalyptic works, indeed, the word "apocalypse" derives from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which translates into English as "revelation". Apocalypse stories tend to describe a revelatory event, in which supernatural knowledge is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient. This special knowledge is often some kind of vision of an, otherworldly, heavenly reality. This explains why angels feature in the gospels during the birth of Christ, and also at the resurrection: in Christ, heaven and earth collided, human history was intersected by God's great saving plan, and hence angels showed up to herald the ultimate revelatory event.

Angels, then, function principally as mediators between humanity and God. Indeed, the word is a direct borrowing of the Greek *angelos*, which means messenger. They serve other functions as well such as protecting and strengthening believers, fighting on the side of the good in cosmic battles, and praising God. However, first and foremost, they are messengers.

An important question, then, which I think we should ask about angels is, why do we need them? The New Testament makes it clear that Christ is the ultimate mediator between humans and God, the bridge between perfect divinity and fallen humanity, who embodied both of those realities. 1 Timothy 2:5 states unequivocally that, “there is one God, and one mediator who can reconcile God and humanity- the man, Jesus Christ”. The book of *Hebrews* tells us that Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, which is superior to the old one. Some of you may be familiar with the story of Jacob’s ladder in Genesis 28, when Jacob has a dream of a ladder linking heaven to earth. In Jacob’s dream, he sees angels ascending and descending the ladder- that is, functioning as a mediating link between heaven and earth. However, in John 1, Jesus says to his first disciples, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” The point Jesus is making, is that he is now Jacob’s ladder. Jesus is the new bridge between heaven and earth.

So why do we still need angels? It’s really important to emphasise that angels are only helpful to our spirituality if they point us to Christ. Both of our readings tonight, mysterious though they are, make it clear that it is God who is the focus of our worship. In the reading from Daniel, the prince of all the angels is called Michael. Michael is three Hebrew words joined together, Mi, Ca, and El, which translate as the rhetorical question Who is like God? And the unspoken answer is: no one. No one else is anything like God. Michael, the prince of the angels, is nothing like God. Not even close. Indeed, many of the angelic names in the Jewish and Christian scriptures point towards God. Gabriel means “God is my strength”. Raphael means “God heals”. Our New Testament reading, *Revelation 5*, despite its perplexing nature, makes it emphatically clear that Christ is superior to the angels. It describes how only the Lamb of God, Jesus, is worthy to open the scroll. No one else present, none of the angels, can open it. Because they are inferior to Christ.

Thus, we should only pay attention to stories and traditions about angels if they ultimately encourage us to worship God, and are pointing us towards Christ. The myths about angels in secular culture, when they seem to stand alone and perhaps are even worshipped, or when they are confused with our deceased human ancestors, are not helpful. In fact, I would go as far as to say they are confusing and damaging, because they do not point to Christ. There are plenty of fascinating stories in our tradition about angels interacting with the saints. For example, Hildegard von Bingen was a twelfth century nun who heard the voice of angels. St Columba also had visions of angels, and there is a tradition that they brought him food. But these towering giants were first and foremost in love with Christ, and that should be our litmus test for weighing up the many apocryphal angelic traditions we encounter throughout Christian history.

How might angels be useful to our faith? Well, firstly they encourage us to show hospitality to strangers. Hebrews 13:2 tells us, “Don’t neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this may have entertained angels without knowing it”. Genesis 18 tells the story of Abraham welcoming three mysterious strangers, who were maybe angels. Have you ever had a weird, memorable encounter with a stranger, that left you transformed in some way? Have you ever had a stranger help you, when you were in a desperate situation? Maybe you met an angel. Maybe you didn’t. At the very least, you saw a fellow human being made in the image of God.

Maybe it is also helpful for us to know, if ever we feel alone in our walk of faith, that we most certainly are not. Not only is God always with us, but perhaps invisible angels are with us as well. If ever you find yourself praying alone, remember- we join in prayer with believers across the world, the saints throughout history and we are also joined in our worship by choirs of angels. There are more things in heaven and on earth than we could possibly begin to understand.

Our, secular, cultural construction of angels is woefully misleading and inadequate for the seemingly apocalyptic challenges faced by our world today. Maybe in these times of drastic climate change, and all sorts of battles between good and evil being played out in our broken, hurting world, our culture is ready for a different vision of angels. For example, I am currently reading *The Testaments*, the new novel by Margert Atwood, in which she rejects the traditional, fluffy view of angels and instead depicts them as sinister guards, dressed in black and holding guns. Maybe it is time for our culture to reimagine angels. And in doing so, let us pray that it will ultimately discover the love of Jesus, which is what it so desperately needs. Amen.