

Angels

Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

(from the Collect for the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels-Sept. 29)

“O EVERLASTING God, who hast ordained and constituted the services of Angels and men in a wonderful order: Mercifully grant that, as thy holy Angels always do thee service in heaven, so by thy appointment they may succour and defend us on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*”

The subject of angels is one that fascinates not only Christians, but the world. This in itself might cause us to pause. Everybody likes comfortable, easy speculation. Angels, after all, are a sort of harmless topic. They make nice mantle ornaments. They blossom into huge, elaborate collections that can occupy a lifetime of yard-sale searches. And, who knows?... maybe they afford a bit of protection when affixed to a car dashboard, or are pinned up somewhere as a token of protection. In these modes, they are almost like pets. We can make them into whatever we want: lovely female depictions. Or chubby, little childlike cherubs that are just plain...*cute!* We can go to great lengths to imagine all that they do for us, even if we make no pretensions whatsoever to practicing the Christian faith. They are conveniently manipulatable, and easily impressed into whatever use we may wish to assign them. We can easily believe in them, or *disbelieve* in them. It doesn't matter. They won't mind, and neither will we. They serve us, and ask nothing of us, and certainly don't make us uncomfortable, as does that *other* topic...*God!*

Used this way angels become, of course, idols, taking God's place. I am reminded of the Apostle Paul's very telling comment:

Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God... These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom...(Col. 2:18, 19, 23)

But it behooves us to get away from such sentimentalism, and look at the matter realistically. If we trace the topic through Scripture, we will find angels involved in the affairs of men in ways that should command our respect and fear, and may cause the sentimentalists to quickly move elsewhere. Think of only a few such examples. A mighty angel with a sword stood at the doorway to Paradise to prevent the banished Adam and Eve from returning (Ge. 3: 24). An angel destroyed tens of thousands of Israelites in divine punishment (2 Sam. 24:15-17). Angels plague the earth with terrible judgments in the last times (Rev. 15, 16). It is likely that it is angels that will *throw into the lake of fire* those who are finally unrepentant.

Thankfully, we can be assured that these beings of such unimaginable glory and power are actually on our side: *Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?* (Heb. 1:14). This is a phenomenal statement. It is saying that believ-

ers are the only ones who can legitimately lay claim to the services and intervention and help of these created beings. Their role in our lives is no mere sentiment. It is one of constant and invisible aid, the actuality of which, of course, is largely hidden from us, and will be known only, it seems, through the retrospect afforded us in eternity. It would be safe to conclude that they keep a constant watch over us. But their service is entirely at God's disposal, which will help us understand why we are not completely immune to the same disasters, accidents, and sickness that are the general lot of man. God uses angels for His own purposes, the wisdom of which often is beyond us, at least now.

The Feast that offers us today's topic also mentions "St. Michael", an archangel. One of his principle roles is his guardianship of Israel. In a famous passage in the prophet Daniel (12:1), where the very last days of earth's history appear to be under discussion, we find the following:

And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book.

More details appear in an electrifying text in the New Testament Revelation of St. John :

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. (12:7-10)

We might almost imagine in our times that this great angel Michael will rise to great prominence and importance as the final curtain descends upon the story of mankind, prior to the Second Coming of Christ.

This last biblical text also opens for us the profoundly disconcerting reality that the angel camp is divided into two completely different sides, one of great good, and the other, great evil.

Another New Testament passage adds more to our understanding:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Eph. 6:10-12)

The angel forces are ranked, on both sides, into an orderly array. All of this implies great organization. They stand under authority, and act in strict obedience to their superiors, whether divine, or satanic. In one case it is the power of pure malevolence, marshaled for wicked and destructive ends. It is a last ditch effort, doomed to failure, to rise up against God's rightful lordship of the universe, and to seek to destroy or at least grievously injure that crown of God's earthly creation

--mankind-- made in His image and likeness. The end of the story is already known: at the Last Judgment, Jesus will say to those who steadfastly refused to love and accept Him: *Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels* (Mt. 25:41).

From all of the above, and from other scriptures, we learn some very profound and deeply solemn lessons about the actual place of angels in the scheme of things. In their evil form, they exercise what appears to be an almost unlimited dominion over the affairs of men (see Lk. 4:6, and 1 Jn. 5:19b). Were it not for the intervention of Christ, they would have succeeded in subverting all of humanity to their cause, and in dragging us all helplessly into the great verdict of eternal destruction to which they are consigned. They seem to have an undying and vindictive hatred for God, and for everything He has done and stands for. They are in sworn and permanent rebellion against Him.

Divine angels, on the other hand, exist in ceaseless, loving, devoted service to God. They are deeply interested and involved in the affairs of men, and especially of the whole story of Christ's redemption (1 Pe. 1:12b), from its beginning, to its consummation. They are tenderly sympathetic with the condition of men. They seem to delight in human progress toward God. They appear to be able to barely restrain their shouts of joy at every small sign of progress we make. One might imagine that were it not for the lovingly restraining hand of the Creator, they would again enter our midst visibly in one great, overwhelming throng, as they did on that first Christmas night. We are destined to see them visibly, at last, at the same moment we behold the face of our Lord for the first time (1 Thess. 4:16b; 2 Thess. 1:7b; Rev. 19:14).

A study of angels, then, brings us into very close contact with the deepest themes of our lives as Christians: the whole story of the Fall; the plan of God in establishing for Himself a covenant people through which He would eventually bring the Redeemer; the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of that Redeemer; the birth and initial years of the Church. And finally, the still expected consummation of history and return of Christ and beginning of the eternal order. There are angels present at every turn.

But not only in these grand designs are they active. They are there in ordinary times, and on ordinary days. And they even accompany us at the hour of our death (Lk. 16:22). It will be more than delight to look some day upon their faces.

Perhaps through lives lived in earnest devotion to God, we can make the task of these heavenly servants of ours somehow easier for them, as we cooperate more and more with the Heavenly Father who created them, and commissioned them on our behalf!

I hope so. God grant it.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.