

Sermon – Sunday September 27th 2020 – Michaelmas

Readings: Hebrews 1:5-end and John 1:47-end.

So, here's the question. How many angels do you think there are in church this morning?

No, I don't mean how many images of angels – like those in our wonderful east window at Nocton, or holding up the roof at Branston. And I don't mean the people who turn up on your doorstep with an offer of help – who you might call angels.

I mean real angels. Invisible to us, but still here, present, living heavenly creatures.

And no, of course we don't know, can't know, how many. And yes, if there were angels here today, I imagine they'd be rolling their eyes and saying to one another: 'What an idiot. She has no idea what she's talking about.'

And they'd be right. We don't know much about angels. But we do we know a little.

Lots of people say they've seen angels. Lots of people believe they exist. People from all around the world. People from all sorts of cultures and faiths.

Angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim.

Remember that spine-tingling passage from the prophet Isaiah. His vision from the beginning of chapter 6. I'm not sure whether he's catching a glimpse into heaven, or seeing the invisible realities of earth.

But either way, Isaiah writes:

'In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

So – all in all, rather impressive. God's own attendants. With wings, and loud voices. Loud enough to shake the building.

What else do we know about angels?

We know that they are part of the created order. They are created, they are creatures. Like we are creatures.

But human beings are a different part of that created order. So no, we don't turn into angels when we die. If you've been looking forward to getting your wings – I'm sorry. You're going to be disappointed.

What else do we know? We know that they are creatures of heaven – but can exist here on earth as well. We know they are generally invisible to us – but can be visible. And that they have wings – arms, hands, faces – and voices. We know they can speak so that human beings can hear them. Remember the angelic host that heralds Jesus' arrival on earth. From Luke's gospel.

'Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them (the shepherds out on the hills, watching their flocks by night) and they were terrified.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying – saying:

'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

A host of angels. An army - of angels. That's what the word host means – not just a lot of them. An army. We're wrong to suppose that angels are cute, or cuddly. They're not soft and fluffy. They are seriously fierce. Disciplined, determined, resolute – an angelic army.

Not least Michael, the archangel, whose feast we celebrate today.

We know two other archangels by name. Gabriel and Raphael.

Gabriel – whose name means: 'the strength of God'.

Gabriel the messenger – often depicted holding a trumpet.

Gabriel who often brings the message: 'Do not be afraid.'

Raphael – whose name means: 'the healing of God'.

Raphael the healer - often depicted holding a flask or bottle of oil for healing.

Raphael who restores sight to Tobit in the Book of Tobit in the Apocrypha.

And Michael – whose name means: 'the strength of God'.

Michael - often depicted holding a sword.

Michael who defeats the dragon in the book of Revelation.

Michael who is the protector, guarding us against the devil, especially at the hour of our death.

Michael - the leader of the armies of God.

Remember Elisha the prophet. How the king sends his army to round up Elisha and his handful of attendants. The king's army surrounds the city during the night. Read it for yourself in 1 Kings 6:15.

And early in the morning the attendant goes out and sees all the king's horses and chariots. 'Alas, master! What shall we do?' he cries. And Elisha replies: 'Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.'

Then Elisha prays: 'O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.' So the LORD opens the eyes of the servant, and he sees; the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. I imagine Michael was there, leading that invisible army.

So - the angels are on our side – but they're not at our beck and call. They're not our servants. They answer to God. But they are sent to serve for our sake.

Which is remarkable, because according to the letter to the Hebrews – the angels are higher up the order of creation than we are. They rank above us. We rank below them.

In Hebrews 2.5 the writer quotes Psalm 8 and asks the question:

'What are human beings that you – that you Lord God - are mindful of them,
what are mortals, that you care for them?
You have made them for a little while lower than the angels.'

Lower than the angels, not higher.

And then the truly astonishing thing – that Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, himself infinitely higher than the angels, stepped down from the glory of heaven – to be lower than the angels, in order to be with us, among us.

And why? Again from Hebrews 'so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone, so that he could be the pioneer of our salvation, could call us brothers and sister, could bring us to glory.'

So – we might not be like Nathanael, seeing the angels of God ascending and descending. But through Jesus, who became for us lower than the angels, we will see heaven opened, heaven opened - to welcome us home.

Amen.