

There are many benefits in believing in angels

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Festival of Michael and All Angels, 30th September 2018

Today is the festival of Michael and All Angels. It's a celebration that not all Christians partake in, because many see angels as relics from the past. Some say we have the Holy Spirit, aka God with us, so who needs angels now? While they have a good point, there are some useful things that come from believing in angels. Of course, angels in our spiritual tradition can be quite different to the ideas that are found in popular culture. For example, the cherubs of popular culture bear little resemblance to the cherubs found in the bible, such as on top of the Ark of the Covenant, where (according to myth) God used to appear on the holiest day of the year. Any Jew hearing two angels had appeared inside Jesus' tomb would have had alarm bells ringing! The point is that in Christianity and Judaism before it, whatever angels are, is always determined by what God is (or how God is understood). That's why the popular notion that angels intervene through miraculous events is so problematic. It doesn't fit well with our understanding of God.

A good place to start with angels is with those found in our church. There are 25 angels in our windows. The biggest is Michael, who was God's favourite, because he was the spirit of Israel. In dealing with him, God was dealing with the spirit, or the heart of Israel. The other angels in our windows are all accompanying various people. What I like about them is that they attest to the fact that often it's not clear whether we experience God directly, or indirectly. Some people experience God directly, in the depths of the soul, by descending into deep silence. Others experience God indirectly through a stirring piece of music. Images of angels remind us that such indirect ways are still encounters with God. The story of Moses' encounter with the burning bush conveys the same idea.

The literal meaning of angel in Ancient Greek is messenger, so in a way, anything which acts as a messenger for God is an angel. A bird singing a beautiful song in the morning is a messenger of the wonder of God's creation. A person who treats us with compassion is a messenger of God's love.

Angels are just one of the range of spiritual beings referred to in the New Testament, but I like to use the term as a shortcut for all of them. (The New Testament writers actually do something just like that.) The mythology there seems to carry over something from the ideas of angels in the Old Testament, in which angels were pictured as seated around God's heavenly throne. In some instances, those angels are representatives of their nations, like Michael. It's a wonderful concept, that firstly, the nations exist to serve God (which means the good of the whole world) and secondly, that sometimes nations fall short of that purpose for which they exist, and so serve themselves, or even worse, force other nations to serve them. It's interesting to imagine that Australia has a special role in the world and wonder what that is.

When you get to the New Testament, you find that angels, as standing for the Powers That Be, can refer to quite different entities. Here's a list of the sorts of things being referred to that belong in the same category as angels: roles or positions which an incumbent fills, such as town clerk, head jailer, emperor, mayor or chairperson, places where a role was played such as town hall or mayor's office. There's the right or authority to exercise power or the body or person so authorized. There are the ideological justifications, political or religious legitimations, so rules, practices, traditions, political correctness, customs. There's sanctions and permissions that undergird the everyday exercise of power. There're references to military might and political clout. There are terms which refer to symbols which transcend the present occupant of a position of power, such as a throne. There's all the

paraphernalia and power resident in the chair and its incumbent. There are references to dominions in the sense of territory over which a lord rules and other forms of ruling power. There's the power of name, which contains one's office, rank and dignity, such as the name Caesar. These are all aspects of human culture, economics, politics and religion. It shows that the New Testament writers are extremely interested in how power exists and is exercised. Their main message to us is that all this is so much a part of life that we take it all for granted and sometimes fail to question whether or not it serves God and therefore the common good (and that can include the earth). We are familiar with questioning for example, whether religion really has God-given authority to direct how we should live. Rather than that being the case, we believe now it's more a case of if religion is life-giving, then it's probably conveying something of God and so carries the authority of being worth considering. The New Testament writers also want us to know that all the Powers That Be are created and therefore their power depends upon us giving it to them. So, when the powers that run the fashion industry tell us we need to wear the latest products, we have the power to resist, although it could mean we end up looking daggy.

As is often the case in tradition, the angels in our church windows all have wings. That symbolizes that they belong to the realm above, which is the spiritual realm. Today we don't think of the spiritual realm being up, but within. So rather than above the material world, the spiritual is within it, or is its inner dimension. So for example, when you walk into a pub, you get a feel for whether it's friendly or not. That's the spirit, or the angel of the pub. Parents checking out schools for their child, will visit to get a sense of the vibe of a school before making a choice. What they are experiencing is something of the angel – the intangible power at work which generates the degree of welcome and warmth, but also how much it cares for its students and staff, whether it drives students to win sport at all costs and so on.

With angels having wings and being in heaven, we might think that ancient people were just making up creatures which carried out their wishful thinking. But I hope you can see that rather than that, it was just a symbolic way of representing ways that they experienced the various forms of power at work in their world. They projected their experiences onto the world 'up there' and personified power in a way that made it explicit and put it into the relationship between God and his creation.

Two other types of spiritual beings referred to in the bible and in literature written between the two testaments which I thought I would mention are Nature Angels and the Elements. Nature Angels are just what they sound like. They're the spirits of plants, animals and rocks. It's the same animistic spirituality that Indigenous Australian have held to for thousands of years. We may like to believe everything has some kind of spirit, or find that too far-fetched, but what's really worthwhile in all that is the notion that we have a connection with everything else in nature and there's an implied responsibility for how we use our power there. Personally, I find it hard to consider a pebble having a spirit, but the spirit of Uluru I can believe in, or the spirit of a forest, or the spirit of the sea, which calms my soul and refreshes me.

Last of all, the Elements. The Elements are a class of entity which belong to the same family as angels, in being not divine, but having divine-like power. The elements determine life and set its boundaries. They are the forces of nature and principles which govern the universe. They are the most basic things there are, such as atoms, but also numbers, the alphabet, musical notes. They are also the rules of logic, the laws, beliefs and rituals of religion. The big take-home message about the Elements from St Paul is: don't idolize them, for that makes the Elements more important than the whole, and the whole is what matters: how everything works together, for the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.