

MICHAELMAS 2024 All Souls' **ANGELS AND MYSTERY**

Jesus said to Nathaniel, "Very truly, I tell you; you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1.51)

George Herbert, a famous English priest, was once asked, "Why don't angels appear today?" to which he replied, "The question you have asked me assumes that angels *do not* appear today, and I am expected to say *why*. And I cannot say 'The Bible stories of angelic appearances are fairy-stories but now we know better, because I regard that as a two-fold falsehood. I am almost tempted to say, 'They used to appear in Bible days, but they have given up appearing now because no-one believes in them', for that has a great deal of truth in it."

From a very early age, I believed I had a guardian angel, and I can remember a time when my sister, Elizabeth, and I used to save up and collect little angelic ornaments or give them as presents to each other or to our parents. I bet if I went on E-bay, which I never do, I could track some down. You used to be able to purchase them in Coles or Boans (WA) for about a shilling and I can remember quite a large collection on our mantle-piece at home and on my sister's dressing table. I would have been 9 or 10 years old at the time and still relatively innocent.

It strikes me that angels seem to have a special appeal to children and adults today who want to move beyond the confines of mere three-dimensional, finite, temporal thinking and enter the mystical and eternal. No wonder Harry Potter was such a huge success, but Harry, (except for 'true believers'), is still only fantasy whereas Angels are the real deal. Notwithstanding issues of fantasy or reality, I feel sorry for people who only want solid, down-to-earth, matter-of-factness, although I would also add that I consider angels to be very down-to-earth – that's exactly the point about them, as the Bible bears manifold testimony. They're a bit like God's 'ambassadors'. The existence of angels explains how God can be everywhere, doing different things at the same time. (Just like clergy!)

What – with Jacob's angel-filled ladder in Genesis; Joseph, betrothed to Mary, who's about to get rid of her when he discovers she's pregnant and he's had nothing to do with it, and an angel puts him straight; then the Holy Family are guided by an angel to Egypt when Herod seeks to destroy the Christ-child. Jesus, himself, is in the wilderness with wild beasts and angels minister to him. Peter in prison, in Acts, is delivered by an angel. And that's to mention just a few. The Psalmist observes in Psalm 8: 'What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour'.

Legal, precise language does not always hold the vital clues to life; in fact, it can be quite useless. It can even get in the way of faith, as St Paul discovered in his conversion. You cannot use it to describe a blackbird's last song before the setting sun or the child with curly hair running across golden sands to touch gentle waves, or two people in love and the ecstasy they feel. As with music or poetry and all the inexactness these basic forms often demand, so is talk of angels who are free from the world's sensory and dimensional restrictions. Our minds and hearts need to be innocent and free to really grasp this. If you want to truly describe our relationship with the divine, scales, rules and equations are useless; so are verifiable statements. Images, symbols, colour, poetry, music and song fare far better.

*Angel voices ever singing
'round thy throne of light
Angel harps for ever ringing
rest not day nor night...*

Yes, the angels and belief in them relieve all the flatness of existence – commonplace thinking. You will never be able to explain them away. Even the makers of our most modern liturgies have been quite unable to dispense with them. For if nowhere else, at the very highest point of our worship, as adoration takes us into the inner mystery of the Divine, we enter a world where Angels and Archangels and the whole company of heaven usher us into that eternal Presence upon whom all space and time are hung: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest!" The angels both lift us up into the unseen – the breathless wonder of the living God; and they bring us down to earth – reminding us of our fragile and transient mortality. Their existence raises for us acutely, in short, the question of what truly constitutes reality. Is reality only the time-space continuum? Is it the physically or logically demonstrable? Is it the pattern of birth and death or the exercise of pleasure pursuits and possessions that all too often actually *possess us*? Is reality that which we make for ourselves or is it the Maker who is Reality? This is an ultimate faith decision. The serious Christian can't have a 'dollar each way' on this.

In concluding, it would be remiss of me not to mention the Society of the Sacred Mission and all the angelic and human activity that has gone on since 1946 in Australia, when St Michael's House, Crafers, was established as a Theological College. I was there from 1968-1972. Many fine priests, like Dean Rowney, did their 5 years formation there. St John's Halifax St Rectory became the SSM Priory in 1978 and had three SSM priests-in-charge: Douglas Brown, Dunstan McKee, and Christopher Myers. The formation of priests was still going on when the SSM began its work there. St Michael's House burnt down in 1983, and St John's became the sole refuge and home for the Society in South Australia up until 2016, when Christopher retired (and I became Locum for 6 months). This church of All Souls' proudly houses a window of Archangel Michael, depicted as a Knight of God, weighing human souls in a balance. It was given in 1924 in affectionate memory of Private Fred Farmer Bassett and Gunner John Vivian Gordon who both died in 1917 in the Great War.

Let us give give thanks for the more than light dusting of angels' wings that has landed upon this church, and upon all that has been achieved to the glory of God in this holy place.

The Angels be with you all.