

Michaelmas term and the knowledge and love of the Angels
St Cross Freshers' Evensong 6 October 2024

Jesus answered and said unto him ... Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.

In the passage from the book of Genesis, the patriarch Jacob sees a ladder which connects heaven and earth. God speaks to him from the top of the ladder, promising to bless Jacob and his family, and promising that Jacob's descendants will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. When Jacob wakes up he says, 'Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not'. This passage is often read when churches celebrate their dedication, the anniversary of becoming a place of worship. It is a passage which invites us to see the physical space of the Church as a spiritual ladder connecting heaven and earth. It is a kind of warning also. It's possible for God to be very near, speaking to us, addressing us even with words of promise, and somehow we do not notice.

This year, is the 140th year since the founding of Pusey House. With the image of the ladder connecting heaven and earth before us, a ladder which is alive with angels ascending and descending, I would like to consider some words of Dr Pusey about angels. What Pusey has to say about angels explains why it is so appropriate that the first term of the academic year to be named for the Angels, Michaelmas. Michaelmas term is named for St Michael and all the Angels. The way Oxford is organized also emphasizes that we grow in knowledge as we live together in community – to be a student in Oxford is to belong to a college. What Dr Pusey says about the angels, and how he lived, can help us to see both what it means to grow in knowledge, and why we learn and work in community.

Toward the end of his life, in 1881, Dr Pusey wrote to a young girl named Beatrice to thank her for a painting she made for him of some flowers.

[Dear Beatrice] Your loving little painting reached me this morning. I love flowers very much. They tell one such histories of the love of God. [God] seems to have given [flowers] all that varied beauty for no other end than to give His creatures pleasure ... I have often thought that they must be for the Blessed Angels to gaze upon and thank God for. The Daisy, as it spreads itself out as wide as it can, seems to be drinking in the love of Heaven; and the Rose, which opens itself to that glow from above and gives out all its fragrance, seems to be giving back love for love.¹

This passage wonderful illustration of what the Church has often called natural contemplation. Everything that exists is stamped with the life of God, and everything that exists shines with the life of God: 'The Daisy seems to drink in the love of Heaven'. Gardens attract us because they shine and shimmer with divine beauty and goodness.

'I have often thought that [these flowers] must be for the Blessed Angels to gaze upon and thank God for.'

¹Liddon, *Life of Pusey*, iv, p 374. It gives back all which it has in return for the warmth which opens it. '... You, my very dear Beatrice, are the rosebud which no force could open (as children sometimes try to force an opening rose with their little fingers and only spoil it) but which the glow of God's love will open as time goes on, more and more. And the white of the lily of the valley tells of purity, and its low-hanging head of tenderness and humility. And then by the name of that lovely flower the Forget-me-not God tells you Forget not Me ... For God will be as much your own as if He had never made Angel or Archangel, or Cherubim or Seraphim: quite your own; quite belonging to your own individual tiny self: for St. Paul says, 'Who loved me and gave Himself for me,' as if there had been no other....'

Here Dr Pusey may be inspired by his great teacher from North Africa, St Augustine of Hippo. St Augustine returned over and over again to Genesis Chapter 1, the very first book of the bible, and to the description of the different days of creation. God creates light on the first Day, 'And God said, let there be light'. But God only creates the Sun and the Moon on the Fourth Day.

What then was this light which God created on Day 1? For St Augustine and many teachers in the early Church, the light created on day one is the angels. The angels are creatures of light who know and who love. Perhaps the power of the most advanced microprocessor might point toward the knowledge of the angels, but these angels are more than processors. Angels are the knowledge the process, and the knowledge angels have is living knowledge, knowledge alive with divine love.

For St Augustine, the description in Genesis chapter 1 of a cycle of days, evenings, and mornings, correspond to different forms of the knowledge which the angels receive and communicate.

First, the angel knows things before they happen. The angels see God's plan before it happens, this is 'daytime knowledge'.

Second, angels see what God does in the world. Over millions and billions of years, the angels see the coming to be of the world as we know it, and all the different kinds of creatures that fill the world. The angels are like journalists or scientist who see what God does -- this is evening knowledge.

3rd and finally, the angels don't just look at things in the world, but since the beginning of time, over billions of years, they turn back to God, and they praise God for all the wonderful things which God has done—this 'morning knowledge'.

Some of the hymns of the Church invite us to share in this morning knowledge of the angels. We joined already this evening in the morning knowledge of the angels in the first hymn:

Angels, help us to adore him -- Sun and moon bow down before him, / Dwellers all in time and space. ... Praise him! Praise him! /Praise with us the God of grace!

What the physicist discovers about the smallest particles, what the archaeologists reveals by careful investigation, what the historian discerns, what the medical researcher learns about how diseases spread or how to prevent them, what we see and learn in all our studies, none of this is a surprise to God and to the angels. All our human studies are a kind of participation in a much richer and fuller divine knowledge. In the words of one modern divine:

'What are all our sciences, what are all our fragments of knowledge but droplets from that fountain of which we long to drink in all its fulness? "My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God." What is our quest for happiness, but a desire for the good; and what is that good we seek – whether knowingly or not – but some participation in the pure and perfect good which is God himself?'²

² Robert Crouse, 'Heavenly Avarice'.

In all our studies, we are invited not just to enjoy what we learn, but to see all that we learn as a kind of revelation the wisdom of God. All our knowing has a kind of divine origin and divine destination, whether or not we know it.

We are invited to let our knowing and learning be part of the praise of God which is always going on. Whenever we give thanks, or whenever delight in what is good, we join the praise of the angels, the living spiritual beings who know and who love.

Dr Pusey was so influential not just because of what he taught, but because of how he lived. The Bible and the Church teach that the angels can protect and help us. This is the foundation of the belief that each one of us has a guardian angel who watches over us. The work of the guardian angels also describes how we are called to help and support each other.

During the summer of 1866 there was a terrible cholera epidemic in London. More than 5000 people died in 1866 in London because of cholera. The natural response most people make is to get away from disease or sickness. Instead, Pusey left Oxford and went to Bethnal Green, the centre of the epidemic. There, he worked with the local priest. Pusey visited the sick and dying. He also helped to set up a temporary hospital, and he helped to find staff for the hospital.

This is a dramatic kind of ministry, but each of us is invited to have a kind of guardian-angel ministry. We may do this in dramatic ways, but we may do it in quite simple ways. We can be the person to offers a word of encouragement, the person who helps a friend or someone who is not a friend when they are lonely, we can replace bitterness with goodwill, we can try to build up community, not tear it down. These can seem like little things, but they can be life changing, and they are part of what makes community life-giving.

Here at the beginning of Michaelmas term, we are invited to prepare for a year of growing in knowledge. The example of the angels invites us to connect growing in knowledge with growing in love.

We are invited to see in all our studying and knowing as a share in the divine knowing and in the praise of the angels, and we are invited to by guardian angels for one another, we are invited to be living signs of the love and goodness of God.