

Homily for St Michael and All Angels (Pusey House)

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, at the High Mass for the Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels, 29 September 2023, by Father Thomas Fink-Jensen, Priest-in-Charge of St John's, New Hinksey, and St Laurence, South Hinksey

Daniel 10:10-19a; Rev 12:7-12; Mat 18:1-10

I must come from a reckless household. For why else would so many stories of angels do the rounds in my family? Of how my rather tiny grandmother as a teenager was pulled out of a crowd which was celebrating the Nazi defeat, yet almost choked and trampled her, pulled out by someone who disappeared immediately. Or of how my mother saw an angel who stopped her 4-year old as he was blown off his bike down the hill and rolling down headed straight for a concrete drop of several meters, whose life was mysteriously spared. Or from my own memory, of how I as a little boy stubbornly refused to listen to my grandmother in an unknown city centre, lost sight and track of her, and a man with a moustache whom I mysteriously trusted took me to the bus where she was anxiously looking for me - after which predictably the man mysteriously disappeared.

Now you may not be as slow or foolish as I can be - share stories after Mass - but I always thought such stories were encouraging to myself, and I greatly rejoiced in them, but I wasn't going to tell anyone else - most especially not people who weren't Christians.

For aren't the stories all a little crazy? For these figures showing up protecting old fragile ladies, guarding the house where foster parents give shelter to a little girl who has been removed from her white supremacist and violent parents, joining in with the rehearsal of a church worship band, or - as my grandfather once noticed as he locked up the church - casually hanging out at the baptism font, they don't seem very compelling but those who believe in them may seem a little mad.

Now I remember the late Metropolitan Kallistos Ware preaching in this chapel on Michaelmas [- Father, the quality of preaching is dropping quite dramatically in this House -] and explaining how in Orthodox theology all altars have their own angels. For we hold that angels exist. They do show up, they might seemingly leave again, but they are there and here at all times. Think of Elisha in Dothan.

Yet, may the Lord forgive my slowness. For although we at times dwell in a culture or society that may overemphasise the measurability or visibility

of reality and all that exists over the spiritual realities underlying those - yet, in my pastoral work, I never cease to be amazed at the number of stories of people who encountered angels - or at the very least 'spiritual beings' of some variety. Of course, I've sat through many a funeral visit where I thought the experience expounded was far from orthodox or sound Biblical teaching - but nevertheless: this is yet another feast full of great missionary and evangelistic potential. And I think the feast is delightfully vague...

For today we give thanks to God for the ministry and service of St Michael and All Angels. Lots of scope there. We rejoice in their worship of God - and will join our prayers with them later on, explicitly so during the Preface and Sanctus - and we ask for their continued assistance in our defence and protection here on earth. But what angels are exactly is harder to define. Spiritual beings, true. Sometimes at the behest of our heavenly Father they may appear in human form - think of Gabriel coming to Our Lady, or appearing in St Joseph's dreams, or many of the stories we encounter - usually indeed to protect us, or to fulfil the meaning of their name as 'angel' which means 'messenger.' But the Scriptural witness of their existence is much broader and diffuse than that. They, at times, seem to represent nations (e.g. Dan 10), possibly churches (Rev 1-3!?), they are traditionally understood in such categories as thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers (Col 1:16) - something much less concrete at first sight than a mysterious figure saving a life - and of course we heard of Satan and his angels: demons.

Now again, demons are - in my experience - a most helpful and powerful evangelistic reality describing people's encounters with a darkness that exceeds their knowledge or reason alone. One just needs to think of all popular movies, series, and books appearing regularly on the topics of angels, the occult, and demons.

But today, we learn from Revelation 12 that however mighty or overpowering that darkness and evil may seem, it cannot last in heaven. Their time will come to an end. Powerful as evil may be, our prayer 'deliver us from evil / [also translatable as] the evil one' is being heard and will be fulfilled. So pray all the more earnestly!

But what are we to make of our reading from Rev 12 about the woe to the earth and sea? "For the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time." Not exactly encouraging, is it? Quite ominous in fact.

So a final 3 quick points:

1) How do St Michael and his angels defeat the dragon? “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.” This is fantastic news! For you and I are to be washed in the blood of the Lamb - we will confess our sins and be absolved in mere minutes from now if we desire it - and will go out from here with the testimony of Christ Himself on our hearts and lips. You have nothing to fear, if you allow yourself to be covered by Christ’s blood and give yourself to Him. St Michael and his angels’ weapons are the same as those available to you and me.

2) The devil may well be full of great wrath knowing that he has but a short time, BUT herein lies yet another advantage for you and me. For mighty and strong as Satan or his angels may be - IF he is bothering you, he ain’t bothering me, and vice versa. He has limited power, and limited time. It is why St James (4:7) can so confidently proclaim that “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” If we resist, by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony, then he will flee from us. Perhaps, as with the Lord’s temptation in the wilderness only to come back again, but as we are not to love our lives unto the death - we again have nothing to fear, but only to gain, from the Lord’s protection and call upon our lives and eternal souls.

3) and then finally, we were most right in our Collect to plead for the angels’ succour and defence here on earth - at the Lord’s behest. For He gives to those who ask, and He opens to those who knock. And so be encouraged by what are considered Eucharistic overtones by Orthodox theologians in our first reading from Daniel, when - much like Isaiah before him – “one like the similitude of the sons of men touched my lips,” for it is the Lord’s touch that opens our mouth. It is the body and blood of Christ that we are to receive that will touch our lips and cover us and give us the word of our testimony. He will touch your lips, and our mouth will proclaim his praise. There is a delightful ongoing discussion about an ancient part of the Roman Canon of the Mass (Supplices Te), which says: “bid these gifts be borne by the hands of your angel to your altar on high, in the sight of your divine majesty.” Again, delightfully vague, but today we join with the worship of all angels and even Christ Himself in the worship of our heavenly Father when we offer the Eucharistic sacrifice.

As an example, look at my son, at 3, being strangely fascinated by this terrible dragon (in the story of St George and the Dragon) because the story is about a brave knight, the red cross knight who defeats him, and my son pretends this all the time. He reflects what Chesterton says: “Fairy tales do

not tell children dragons exist. Children already know the dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed.”

This is what we celebrate at Michaelmas, (1) the knowledge that dragons can be killed, (2) that God sends angels to fight against the dragon for us, (3) that He protects and succours us through the holy angels, and (4) ultimately comes as the great knight who kills the dragon Himself.

So rejoice, and surrender wholeheartedly, joyfully and delightfully to Him who sent (sends) one like the appearance of a man, saying to Daniel - and by extension to you and me: “O man greatly beloved, fear not; peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong.”