

Homily for St. Michael and All Angels

(October 3, 2010 - Trans.)

Fr. Rylan notes that he does, at times, take liberties with the text while preaching, so this text may not be exactly the same as delivered.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What are angels exactly? We hear about them all the time but is there a Christian dictionary definition of an angel? Well, no. Not really. There are however indications from a variety of sources that touch on the matter of angels: Scripture, the teachings of the Church Fathers and Mothers, mystics and divines, the tradition of the Church and of course her liturgy and prayers.

What we discover is complex and multi-layered so I will try and give a condensed summary. Angels are divine beings who reside in the ethereal realm of the spirit who on occasion are sent by God into the created realm with a mission to perform. Being divine, they are mysterious and therefore defy human logic. And yet many, including myself, believe they can be perceived by human senses; much like the wind can be felt even though it forever evades capture.

They do not always appear as glowing lights with wings, though this would be more than cool and probably a lot more persuasive. But alas most accounts portray them coming to humanity in forms so ordinary that we would be forgiven in mistaking them for a person. In fact, I suspect as the author of Hebrews states, many of us have entertained angels without realizing it.

We discover that they are themselves – like everything else – created by God and that they exist first and foremost to give praise and glory to the Almighty. Only secondarily do they exist to minister to God's people on earth who are still upon the sojourn of faith.

Though they minister in a variety of ways their primary interaction with humanity is as messengers. In fact the Hebrew word for angel “malach”, means “messenger.” Some notable examples of this are: The appearance of the three angels to Abraham and Sarah who bore the good news that Sarah would bear, a child, Isaac (which of course saved the covenant from extinction). We are told that it was also an angel present in the burning bush through whom God spoke to Moses (Exodus 3.2).

Of course as Christians we would be remiss to forget the three most important events involving angels: The Annunciation of the Son of God to the Blessed Virgin Mary by the angel, the choir of angels heralding the news of the Messiah's birth to the shepherds in the field and the greatest of all announcements, that of Our Lord's resurrection on Easter morning pronounced from the empty tomb to the women.

Angels however are not limited to the role of God's heavenly Canada Post. We read also that they are sent to comfort God's people, as was the case with Israel in response to their cries for mercy amid slavery in Egypt. They are sent to guide God's people, for example during Israel's wanderings in the desert, when an angel was sent to lead them by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (Exodus 14.19). They are even found in the Old Testament at the head of the armies of Israel.

Finally a darker aspect of the work of angels is their involvement in delivering God's wrath and judgment. Just look through the Revelation to John and you will encounter examples such the seven angels with the seven plagues among many.

So we have glanced at some of the general functions of angels, but what about those angels who are explicitly identified. In speaking on the subject, St. Gregory the Great draws forth three unique examples of angels who are given proper names. He says:

"In that holy city, where perfect knowledge flows from the vision of almighty God, those who have no names may be easily known. But personal names are assigned to some, not because they could not be known without them, but rather to denote their ministry when they come among us."

First there is St. Michael whose name translates, "Who is Like God?" He is sent whenever a miraculous act of power must be performed. His actions and his name reveal that God alone is all-powerful and omnipotent. God is truly the God of the impossible.

A great demonstration of this truth is found in Revelation where we see the archangel as the leader of the armies of heaven, who by the Blood of the Lamb, ultimately defeats Satan and casts him out of heaven.

For those with the eyes of faith then, Michael is a sign of God's loving protection here and now and his ultimate triumph over evil, which is why Michael has become the most revered of the angels, his name for centuries, being invoked by Christians in times of temptation and danger.

Then there is Gabriel, whose name means, "God's strength." He was the one sent to the Virgin Mary, as I mentioned earlier, to announce the Father's plan to send his only-begotten Son. Thus God's strength announced the coming of the Lord and God's strength was promised at Christmas for it would take God's strength for the Son to offer himself as the sacrifice by which Michael and his army would overcome evil. For those with eyes of faith then, Gabriel is a sign of God's solidarity with us; a solidarity that conquers the evil of our daily lives.

Finally there is Raphael which means "God's Remedy." We encounter Raphael in the Book of Tobit where he befriends a father named Tobit who is blind. After a long journey Raphael even-

tually touches his eyes and banishes the darkness of his blindness. For those with eyes of faith then, Raphael is a sign of God's healing grace at work in us, bringing joy out of suffering; resurrection out of death.

For these reasons Christians gather to celebrate this feast today; paying our respects to Michael and his host and thanking God for such a gift as these divine beings. I am sure however that rational adults getting together to celebrate angels must appear silly to those outside the Church. I know it does to some people even inside the Church. Everywhere I go, I am told by laity and clergy alike that it is childish and foolish to have such beliefs.

I am always saddened when I hear this because it indicates that the box of human reason these folks are operating out of isn't big enough to include the God of the impossible. As if God ability to operate is defined by the same limitations as ours. If that is the case, then what kind of God is that to call upon?

But I suppose this is to be expected in a world that demands signs and wonders before it believes in anything—you know the old motto, "Seeing is believing." No Christians cannot point to the latest scientific study for data that proves beyond a reasonable doubt angels exist. But neither can we do so concerning God or the resurrection or love.

It comes down to trust. We can point to the effects of such belief; how it changes our attitudes and approach to life. This is why for those of us who profess the one, holy catholic faith this feast is not about proof, but belief. We do not gather here hoping to spy unicorns or phoenixes. It is not fantasy or magic we seek in order to escape from a painful reality. If it is, you will be sorely disappointed.

But rather we are here because we have seen. And we have seen because we believe. It really should be, "Believing is seeing." And our belief has shown us that we are not alone but are in fact sustained and supported by an innumerable host whose concern it is to minister the life and healing of Christ to our pain.

Love cannot be calculated yet we can feel its effects. So also God cannot be measured or the Spirit constrained but we experience his movements. We "see" with our heart and soul God at work all around us, bringing about the consummation of the kingdom which Christ established on the Cross. Co-workers with God and with us in this work are angels.

Not everything can be explained or reasoned through, even when it occurs in a measurable, moderately predictable space-time continuum at the hands of supposedly rational beings. There is enough of this world which is mystery that we would be foolish not to give faith (and angels) the

benefit of the doubt.

Of course it is not necessary for salvation that Christians believe in angels. But I would ask us to consider what we are saying when we profess, “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen?”

Perhaps we do look foolish gathering here this morning to thank God for unseen beings that we believe God sends to guard, guide and enlighten us. But I rather think Christians are called to be fools. For isn't God's foolishness wiser than human wisdom?