

St Michael and All Angels, 29 September 2024

Readings: Genesis 28.10-17, Psalm 103.19-22, Revelation 12.7-12, John 1.47-51

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

Today on this Feast of St Michael and All Angels I will briefly articulate how I approach this Feast of the Church against the historical background of the Enlightenment with its call to human reason and human reason alone and why the Feast is personally dear to me. My door of entry today is via science fiction, which I had a great fondness for. A current university professor at my alma mater was asked which book had most influenced him. He chose *Martian Time-Slip* by Philip K. Dick saying, it is “a relatively minor work in his canon, written in the early '60s, it's ... about corrupt land speculators on Mars in the remote future of 1994—which doesn't sound that interesting, except that foiling the plot of the would-be speculators involves time-travel and **altered perceptions of reality.**” When asked, Why did this book make such an impact on you?, he replied: “More generally, an early exposure to Philip K. Dick showed me not only that science fiction can be a genre of ideas, asking deep questions and coming to interesting insights, but also that it can engage with the contemporary world in illuminating ways.”

For some, science fiction will be a strange door to walk through to understand how I appreciate the Feast of St Michael and All Angels and to which through my own biography I have a commitment to keeping alive and helping others to see its relevance for Christian believing, having myself been ordained a deacon 40 years ago at Michaelmas and serving my title at St Michael and All Angels, Heavitree, (Hefa's tree), Exeter, England together with my own encounter with God, my calling into ordained ministry. These three reasons underline what follows.

St Michael and All Angels is the feast that keeps open the reality of the Other, that which we cannot see or as we say in the Nicene Creed 'seen and unseen'. The Feast keeps open the door to the greater reality in which our lives are set that is more than just touch, smell, taste, hearing or sight. God's kingdom which may well include beings other than ourselves, together with the presence of angels and indeed Cherubim and Seraphim is a place of relationships, interconnectedness. It is not a place of solitude, isolation and loneliness.

One of the few sermons I remember dates back to when I was working in Bradford, Yorkshire as the Bishop of Bradford's Chaplain to Students. The theme was 'our God is too small' and it was addressed to Christians of an Evangelical mind. And yes one of the fallouts of the Enlightenment was that our God in the West did become small. We developed an imagination for science through endless testing, but lost our imagination for the transcendent. Science grew. God diminished. We forfeited our openness to God and the greater reality in which our lives are set, the reality of God, God eternal, our being made in his image and predestined by God for eternity. Our Christian faith reminds us of the greater reality, and the Feast of St Michael and All Angels plays its part in keeping that reality alive **both within the Church** and in the world.

It keeps open the door to the magnitude of God's creation and moreover to God's kingdom, an everlasting kingdom, which is greater than this life alone, this world alone, this earthly life. When Jacob dreams he sees beings, angels descending and ascending a ladder that stretches into heaven, he sees for a moment that heaven and earth stand in close relationship to each other – Jacob's unexpected glimpse of divinity to which we can hopefully add our own.

Some here will remember the art installation entitled Himmelsleiter (heaven's ladder) by the female artist Billi Thanners in the Stephansdom for the Long Night of the Churches (Lange Nacht der Kirchen). The Himmelsleiter was inspired by the ladder in Jacob's dream. The ladder in the Stephansdom extended all the way up to the rafters of the south transept. It was illuminated from within by an inner golden light reminding us that the door to heaven through God's saving and reconciling work in Christ has been flung wide open, that we may dwell in His presence, now not only for Jacob but now for all. We may daily climb the ladder in prayer through faith, but we must also return to our daily lives and the challenges of the same: ageing, caring for relatives, job loss, sickness, making ends meet, worries about children and grandchildren, misunderstanding, broken relationships, decisions needing to be taken, loss of faith and perspective, hardened hearts, pride, selfishness, vanity, exploitation... Faith is not about escape, but rather living life richly in God, with God and how we mostly perceive as towards God.

God is continually and abundantly pouring out grace and blessing on all, and especially on those who acknowledge him as Lord, Father of all, Saviour, Friend, ready and desiring to keep his commandments, while coming to him expectantly in hope, in prayer, in praise, in need and in sorrow, in faith and joy.

Angels bring messages. This is one of their primary functions. To Mary Gabriel says, '**Do not be afraid ... you have found favour with God. ... you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.** [He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.] He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Luke 1:30-31 To Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome '**Do not be alarmed;** [you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.] **He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.** [But go, tell his disciples and Peter

that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.'] (Mark 16:6-7)

The message of the archangel Michael is that there is a spiritual battle that we must be alert to, take seriously as it underlies all our conflicts. The depiction of St George and the Dragon in the stained glass window makes the same point.

In the letter to the Hebrews we read how people have entertained angels unknowingly. (Hebrews 13:2) The angels we meet and the messages they bring are mostly hidden behind our human exterior. By means of God's grace we can all assume for a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the dress of the angels and become God's messengers in service to the Good News entrusted to us. God's Good News in Jesus Christ.

My message, may it be of God, is that having a Christian faith, having a living faith, a lived faith makes a difference, makes *the* difference, even if one does so imperfectly, as my family know. Faith makes the difference. Of this I am certain and of this we must all become certain. Jacob figuratively wrestled with God. We all do. We all wrestle with God and this is right. Our faith is alive. It is to grow. It wants to make a home in us. Some of the wrestling can as a friend writes, 'My own [wrestling] has at times been a shaking of the foundations!' to response to my insight that some of the intellectually wrestling is acutally fun. Our wrestling with God reminds us that the faith we have been given, this ever so precious gift, is not only important to us, it will come to define us, see Paul the Apostle, as we seek from our very limited and limiting perspectives to better appreciate and come to love the God who makes himself known to us in Jesus, as loving Father and giving us his Spirit, his Holy Spirit. Today may we all be brushed by angel wings. **Amen.**