

24th September 2023

Michaelmas

Let us pray:

Everlasting God, you have ordained and constituted the ministries of angels and mortals in a wonderful order: grant that as your holy angels always serve you in heaven, so, at your command, they may help and defend us on earth; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

This week, sees the celebration St. Michael and All Angels, which is sometimes called Michaelmas and is on the 29th September. The prayer I started the sermon with is the prayer (or collect) that is for Michaelmas.

Michaelmas is one of England's old quarter days, and if you are in business, and have quarterly targets, you still have pressures at Michaelmas, but with the secular calendar we are given an extra day to achieve them!

There is a lot of folklore around Michaelmas, some of which are linked into the biblical stories involving St. Michael such as the fact that you shouldn't eat blackberries after this date, and more about that later.

So who is St. Michael and why is he associated with angels and why do we have some customs and traditions about him.

St. Michael is one of the archangels mentioned in the bible, and he is mentioned in both the old and new testaments. When St. Michael is mentioned he is described as a warrior. If we look at some of the times St. Michael is mentioned in the bible, one of the Old Testament readings is from the book of Daniel, where the archangel Michael appears to Daniel in one of his visions and is a vision of an angel with a fiery sword and one of the New Testament readings is from the book of Revelation and is the passage where there is a war in heaven and St. Michael leads the heavenly army and over throws Satan, or the devil out of heaven. The devil in this image is pictured as a dragon. As St. Michael is shown as a warrior in the bible this is why you often get churches dedicated to St. Michael in towns and villages where there is a military connection, but please remember that St. Michael and All Angels church dates back about six centuries before the RMA came to Sandhurst.

But St. Michael is not the only Archangel mentioned in the bible the other archangel, which you may have heard about is Gabriel, who visits Mary to tell her she is going to be the mother of Jesus and then there are two lesser arch angels who are Raphael who appears in the Aprocypa book of Tobit and there is another archangel called Uriel who is

mentioned in another ancient Hebrew book called the Book of Enoch.

However, aside from Archangels, these are not the only examples of heavenly beings that are mentioned in the bible, and some of their occurrences are very well known for example

- The heavenly host telling the shepherds that Jesus had been born.
- The angels meeting the women at the tomb the first Easter morning.

But what is clear that out of the 66 books in our standard bibles (Excluding the apocrypha) in 35 of them, angels and heavenly beings are mentioned, they span from Genesis all the way through to Revelation and as you may know our bible is divided into different groups of books such as history, wisdom literature such as the psalms and in every group of books, angels and heavenly beings are mentioned.

Please don't worry, I'm not going to go through all of them today! However I will highlight some of them,

Throughout the bible we have mentions of

- Angels
- Arch Angels
- Heavenly Hosts
- Cherubim and the singular cherub
- Seraphim and the singular Seraph.

The reason that the bible uses different terms is that they are not all the same, throughout the bible they have different roles and different tasks and it is clear that while they share similarities they are different.

Now if I asked you to describe an angel you would probably describe a person with wings and this has been a popular image since the fourth century.

However this is not a truly accurate picture of angels, but it is not an un-biblical image because if we turn to 1 Kings chapter 6, cherubim are described as people with large wings.

Seraphim are also described as having wings in chapter 6 of Isaiah but they have 6 wings, not just two that we typically see.

In the bible there are other descriptions of angels which include beings in dazzling or white clothes, such as the description of the angels who met Mary on that first Easter morning (Luke chapter 24 verse 4), to being described as men who meet Abraham (Genesis chapter 18 verse 2) or not being very easily seen as shown in Numbers chapter 22 when a donkey could see an angel blocking the road but the owner riding him couldn't, until the end when the donkey turned round and spoke to the owner. Several other mentions of angels and heavenly beings are not described in the bible.

Now we have looked at what Angels and the heavenly beings look like, we need to examine what they do.

Earlier, I mentioned that St. Michael the Archangel is known as a warrior and this is why he is often depicted with a flaming sword as this is how he is described in the book of Daniel where he appears in a vision to Daniel, Daniel had just finished a period of mourning and fasting when he had this vision of which included someone holding a fiery sword, and Michael one of the chief princes assisting in a battle against the prince of Persia which at that time and in that context was the enemy.

The vision is similar to John's vision of Christ in Revelation and both the books of Daniel and Revelation have some things in common, both are a different kind of book, they are both often categorised as apocalypse books, books which look at the end of the age or world that is to come.

It is in Revelation where we have the example of Michael leading a war and throwing Satan out of heaven (which is why the folklore says you don't pick blackberries after Michaelmas as the devil is meant to have landed on a blackberry bush after being thrown out of heaven).

However not all angels and heavenly beings are warriors.

The word "Angels" comes from a Greek word meaning messenger but while some angels are known for being messengers (for example the angels who visit Abraham to tell him Sarah will have children¹ or the Archangel Gabriel visiting Mary also to tell her she will be the mother of Jesus ²).

But warriors and messengers are not the only roles,

Cherubim and Seraphim have specific roles and their role is to devote themselves to worshipping around the throne of God. They are described as singing and praising God and some of the words used in Anglican liturgy which is known as the Sanctus and they come from the words that the Cherubim and Seraphim are quoted as saying in both Isaiah and in Revelation. The words they sing have inspired part of our liturgy at Holy Communion when we say the Sanctus – the words that start "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Power and Might, Heaven and earth are full of your glory."

The role of angels praising God are frequently referred to in the bible, if we look at some of the psalms, such as psalm 148 verse 2 then the image of angels praising God is accurate.

Praising and worshipping God, being God's messengers and being God's warriors are three of the different tasks that Angels and heavenly beings

¹ Genesis 18

² Luke 1 (26-38)

and they are very different but they have one thing in common and that is that they are known to be obedient to God and to his will.

We started by looking at how the bible describes angels and what they do, but how does this relate to us in our lives, is it just enough to know that there is a whole heavenly host of Seraphim, Cherubim, Angels and archangels who are obedient to God and do His will?

The bible is full of stories, of people and how they obey (or not) God and follow (or not) his will and we can see that there are occasions where people and angels interact. The bible is there to encourage us, to teach us and inspire us. We know that being obedient to God and His will sounds hard and it is and it is but what it means is to understand what God is saying to us and what he wants us to do. We can do this through studying God's word and to learning how we apply it to our lives and here the bible gives us an example of how to do just that; Our reading from Hebrews reminds us that every day actions, such as being kind and welcoming and showing hospitality to those who are strangers. Is being obedient to God. The reading is from the New Testament book of Hebrews but it refers back to some of the stories in the Old Testament such as when Abraham entertained three men, who told him that he and his wife would have children (at that time they were both childless and old). Abraham entertained them, gave them hospitality and as

they left it was revealed that they were in-fact angels.

To conclude, Angels and heavenly beings are all part of the wonderful world that God has created and they are different, they look different, they have different jobs. St Michael is a warrior angel and as such is a protector.

I'm going to finish with a verse from a hymn that is often sung at Michaelmas, the hymn is "Christ the Fair Glory of the Holy Angels" and is ascribed to Archbishop Rabanus Maurus who lived in the 8th century and was originally a Benedictine Monk in and later became Archbishop of Mainz in Germany.

"Send thine archangel Michael from thy presence,
Peacemaker blessed, may he hover o'er us
Hallow our dwellings that for us thy children,
All things may prosper".