

Sermon for Michaelmass 2018, St Michael and All Angels, Mount Dinham on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Dedication and Consecration.

Blessed be God in his Angels and in his Saints. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Firstly, I must say thank you for inviting me to come and preach at this Patronal Festival. I owe this place and the people in it, you, so much and it means more than I can say to have been invited here on such an occasion.

As I wrote this sermon, I had words from Canon Thurmer ringing in my ears: Michaelmass Day is *NOT* a celebration of 150 years of the dedication of the church! No. Rather it is a Patronal feast, giving thanks for 150 years of the protection, guidance and ministrations of St Michael and All Angels and that needs to be the main subject of this sermon. But as tomorrow is the actual 150th anniversary of the consecration of the building, I will talk a bit about it, if only to say that I have always felt that this church is simply none other than the house of God, and despite everything which it has withstood over the past 150 years: bombs, worrying cracks caused by underground car parks or the cries of grumpy and irascible directors of music, ... nevertheless here we here today, surrounded by God, his angels and his saints in this beautiful and holy church.

Coming to this place as a relatively happy Anglican, but one who had started life as a Roman Catholic, and I must say I found here something familiar, but something deeper and richer. Here the Catholic expression of faith is brought to life in a wonderful, at times slightly eccentric, yes, but deep way. Becoming part of this church and its traditions opened up for me the world of Anglo-Catholicism, for which I will be always grateful.

We, as catholic Christians, are so lucky, because have been given the whole faith, and, as Fr Peter Lee used to say, we must 'keep it, and pass it on'. It is a huge responsibility. But what a wonderful thing we have: the whole faith. This is what we celebrate today in this Mass, and it is what we are called to continue.

Michaelmass is, for us, about giving thanks for the prayers and guidance of the patron of this community, St Michael, and all the Angels. In such a significant anniversary year particularly, we must not simply look back with nostalgia, but consider the future. This feast challenges us to think about how the Angels work, shaping the past and the future. And what are we to do, having come this far? How do we appreciate the work of the angels, and make it our own?

There is so much that we can learn from the past. So much that needs to be cherished, preserved and carried on, faithfully and carefully. But our Gospel today contains a warning: we must be careful. Nathanael, looking back at his tradition and experience, doubted there was anything good to come out of Nazareth...then suddenly, he is face to face with Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael wonders what our Lord observed of him under the fig tree...and he asks him, 'do you believe in me because of what I know of your past? In the future, you will see Angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'. Jesus teaches us that we must think about what is to come: we are called to examine our faith in the future.

The war that St Michael and his Angels fought against the dragon was essentially about the future. There is no place in heaven for the devil, who knows and frets that time is short, and tries to cease the future for his own ends. He is trying to cease our future, the future of mankind—and control it. That is what St Michael and the Angels are fighting for: our future with God.

If you are anything like me, one of the battles that you constantly have to fight within yourself is that battle to control the future, to shape it, so that we can find some peace in the present....but it often doesn't turn out the way we planned, and more worry comes, because we

know, in our heart of hearts, that we *cannot* control the future; and you get a sense that God must be having a good chuckle at your efforts to predict the course of events, or the reactions of those whom perhaps we are trying to steer. When we are able to let go and trust in God, only then do we truly have a future.

This is why we need faith: a trust in the future that Christ promised Nathanael and us, because we need to appreciate that God, and his Angels and his saints, do not see things, and us, as we see them and ourselves. God sees beyond the weakness of our humanity. As Tieldhard de Chardin encourages us to see ourselves from a different perspective, he said: 'We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, but are spiritual beings having a human experience'.

This is what the Angels reveal to us because they are of the spiritual realm: something which perhaps we sometimes struggle to connect with, or not think about. Our call to have faith in the future is about trust and belief in the spiritual life, which is essentially a life of completeness and perfection that God promises to us in Jesus Christ. This is what the 150 years of catholic witness, music, ceremonial, incense, fellowship have been all about.

So where are the Angels now? As I am sure you know, the word Angel comes from the Greek *Angelos*, meaning messenger.

What message to they bring to us? I think that the message on this occasion, as we give thanks for 150 years, is essentially the same message the Angel Gabriel gave to the Blessed Virgin Mary when she was called to bear the Truth: 'do not worry, Mary, take courage, trust and have faith in the future'. Mary embraced faith in the future: her 'yes' to the future in Jesus Christ that God offered to her through the angel, changed the world and forever.

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This church and Mary aside, what are we to make of Angels? Is there really a cause to take them seriously? As St Peter was freed of his chains in prison, did he immediately appreciate that it was the work of angels?

I was once at lunch, sitting next to a notable academic who had written a book on Angels—I am, of course, not going to name any names—but she said that even after writing the book, she was still a bit lukewarm and unsure about angels.... But back to my point. What do we know about Angels and how can we relate to them?

We learn from all the various biblical texts that Angels come in many different shapes and forms. They are purely spiritual beings, without their own physical bodies, but possessed of intelligence and their own will—which is why there are both good and evil ones. As we heard, St Michael fights the evil ones in Revelation 12, and Jesus himself resists the fallen-angel-in-chief, Satan, when he is in the Wilderness for forty days and nights.

Angels seem not to have the power to know the secrets of our hearts, or govern our wills, but can assist us in ordering our lives towards God. They are traditionally grouped into three orders: the seraphim, cherubim and thrones (who carry out the work of adoration), the dominions, principalities and powers (who engage in fighting evil) and the virtues, angel-guardians and archangels (who see to the custody of creation). All of these various types and orders of angels are meant to be working together, God working through all of them.

In the bible, we find angels in charge of the elements (Revelation 12:1, 14:18, 16: 1–10), guarding nations (Daniel 10), fighting Satan (Rev. 12:7) guarding us from peril (Daniel 6:22, etc); they protected Lot, saved Hagar and her child, stayed Abraham's hand, led poor Lazarus to paradise.... and, to top it all, a bit like our choir here, they can sing for ages without pausing for breath! 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory' (Isaiah 6: 3). And we shall join in their unending song shortly.

Adoration, fighting evil, taking custody of creation: all things that we must do and be guided in, here, now, in this place, if we are to have faith in the future.

But what about of the fear of it. The anxiety caused by looking back, worrying about how we are to carry on, how we are to keep the faith within the limits of time and resources. These are the worries of the fallen-angel-in-chief, Satan, who was overwhelmed by sin and could not accept God's love as the future.

The angel Gabriel announced the Good News, the birth of Jesus, and of course his precursor, John the Baptist; the Angel visited Jesus whilst he lay as a helpless babe in the manger (see Luke: 2: 13–15). The angels protected Jesus in his infancy, served him in the desert and gave him strength in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43). The angel in the empty tomb tell the women of his resurrection (Mark 16: 5–7). The fact that Jesus knows and makes use of angels, and that in his humanity he is protected by them, means that we need to take them seriously and can legitimately benefit from their help as he has done.

The Angels help us to shape our futures by bringing us closer to God so that his purposes for the future can be realised. That is the work of this church going forwards. The tradition, beauty, the community, fellowship we find in places such as this, is here to both encourage and challenge us; the incense and mystery, sound and taste of this place is remind us that the Angels are with us, that God works through everything he has, and will stop at nothing in order to draw us beyond our limited humanity into the perfection of holiness. This is the future; the message of the Angels and what they are fighting to protect for us that we might realise it and claim it as our own, to loose us from the chains that bind us, be they leaky roofs, a lack of money, or a lack of understanding and care from fellow Christians.

The next 150 years requires little, save a trust in the promises of Jesus Christ, promises that we must live out in order to keep the faith and pass it on, because, again to quote Teilhard de Chardin, 'the future belongs to those who give the next generation reason for hope'. The angels call us to adore our God, to worship the truth revealed to us in Christ, and to set ourselves free to work on that hope, and build a faith in the future.

And so may he, who *is* that hope, and to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit belongs all might, majesty dominion and power, give us grace through the work of the Angels, to live out our faith, in trust and with courage, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Fr Steven Martin – Saturday 28th September 2018.

