

Sept 29, 2024 Homily – Genesis 28.10-17/Revelation 12.7-12/John 1.47-51

preached by the Rev. Jonathan Askwith at St. Helen's Church, Orleans

We have a challenging juxtaposition of liturgical observances today. On the one hand, today is the feast of Saint Michael and All Angels, a holy day on which we celebrate all things angelic. On the other, today is also Orange Shirt Sunday, the Sunday nearest the new National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, when we honour the memory of the thousands of indigenous children who never came home from residential schools, not to mention the impact the schools have had on survivors.

The challenge posed by observing these two special days simultaneously comes from something angels are commonly said to do, which is protect people from harm. I am sure that we are all familiar with the idea of ‘guardian angels’, for instance. Indeed, in our Collect of the Day today, we prayed that ‘at [God’s] command,’ the ‘holy angels... may help and defend us here on earth.’¹

Saint Michael, the archangel who is the titular angel for today, may be said to be the ultimate guardian angel, for it is he who is traditionally invoked by Christians in prayer for protection.² He is also the patron saint of several occupations whose members put themselves in harm’s way, and has been ‘presented as [a] powerful agent of God who wards off evil from God’s people’.³

Although our readings for today do not address it, there is support in the Scriptures for the notion of angelic protection. The most famous such passage is probably from the ninety-first psalm, in which it says, ‘For the angels of God shall have charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’⁴

And the words of our Lord himself may be interpreted in support of the idea, too. According to Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says, ‘Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.’⁵

But, as you have no doubt guessed, what happened in residential schools puts paid to any simplistic notion that there are ‘guardian angels’. We can hardly say in good conscience that angels protect us, at least without qualification, when thousands of children died of neglect, maltreatment, and abuse, to say nothing of the lifelong trauma the schools inflicted upon survivors.⁶

¹ BAS424; cf. *For All the Saints* (FAS), rev. ed., ed. Stephen Reynolds (Toronto: ABC Publishing, 2007), p. 295.

² Mary Grahame Hunter, ‘Who Is the Archangel Michael?’, *Earth & Altar*, dated 11/11/22; accessed 28/09/24; <https://earthandaltarmag.com/posts/who-is-the-archangel-michael?rq=angels>.

³ Hunter, *op. cit.*; the quoted text is from FAS294.

⁴ Ps. 91.11-12, trans. A Liturgical Psalter, *Pray Without Ceasing*, ed. the Ven. Dr. Richard Leggett (Toronto: General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2024), p. 312; cf. BAS828.

⁵ Mt. 18.10.

⁶ According to *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, an estimated 6,000 children died attending residential schools; see ‘Residential Schools in Canada’, J. R. Miller, updated Tabitha De Bruin *et al.*, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*; posted 10/10/12; edited 11/01/24; accessed 28/09/24; <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools>.

The Scriptures, fortunately, do not take a simplistic view of angelic protection. Angels are presented in a variety of roles, for one; for another, many other psalms, among other parts of the Bible, attest to the suffering of God's people. One of the functions angels have in Scripture is as intermediaries between God and humankind, and, ironically, in that capacity they may even be said to protect us from *God*, of all people, for there is a tradition in the Old Testament that humans cannot survive a direct encounter with God, as in one passage from the book of Exodus, where God says to Moses, 'But... you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.'⁷

The most common role angels have in Scripture is as messengers. Indeed, the Hebrew and Greek words for 'angel' mean precisely 'messenger'.⁸ This means that angels are not so much protectors as they are postal workers, as it were; at least angels don't have to deal with territorial dogs.

As for Michael, in the Bible he appears in the books of Daniel and of Revelation, and there, he does not so much protect humans as he fights alongside them or in their stead in apocalyptic conflicts, as in today's passage from the book of Revelation, where 'Michael and his angels' defeat the great 'dragon and his angels'.⁹ Michael does not here prevent human suffering; indeed, the suffering and death of Jesus and of the martyrs contribute to Satan's defeat, as the 'loud voice' the seer hears proclaims: '[They] have conquered [the dragon] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.'¹⁰

Our stories from Genesis and from John's Gospel today, meanwhile, present angels as signifying the presence of God. In a dream, Jacob sees the 'angels of God... ascending and descending on' a ladder, bringing heaven and earth together.¹¹ The interaction between heaven and earth symbolised by angelic traffic up and down the ladder enables Jacob to encounter God during his dream, such that when he wakes, Jacob says, 'Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!'¹²

According to John's Gospel, Jesus says, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'¹³ He alludes to Jacob's dream, doing so to provide an image showing that he, Jesus, is where God's presence is now to be found.

⁷ Ex. 33.20.

⁸ Hunter, *op. cit.*

⁹ Rev. 12.7; *cf.* v. 8.

¹⁰ Rev. 12.10-1.

¹¹ Gen. 28.12.

¹² Gen. 28.16.

¹³ Jn. 1.51.

It is actually strange that the Scriptures attest to angels when angels are, strictly speaking, superfluous. God does not need intermediaries, because God may be encountered anywhere. God does not need messengers, for there are plenty of places in Scripture where God speaks directly to mortals. And yet, here angels are, helping God do things God doesn't need help doing.

The Scriptures don't try to explain this anomaly; you might say that they take angels for granted. One way of looking at it is to say that, since angels are creatures like we are, they are inherently more accessible to us than God is. There is a sense in which we can relate to angels in a way that we cannot to God. God may not *need* angels, but you could say that we do.

You could even go so far as to say that angels are the only beings in the created order created specifically to help us. The majority of the time in Scripture, although not always, when someone encounters an angel, that angel was sent to help them in some way.

There is even a sense in which we can affirm that angels protect us in some way, just not as 'guardian angels'. I said before that Jesus' words can be interpreted to mean that angels protect the vulnerable. But a better interpretation, one that is actually supported by the context in which Jesus said those words, would be that angels are *advocates* for the vulnerable before God; the angels who Jesus says 'continually see the face of my Father in heaven' are as it were reminding God to bring justice for the 'little ones'. But what Jesus says elsewhere in that same chapter about the vulnerable shows that those angels are really advocating for the vulnerable to *us*; they remind us continually that God is a God of justice and of reconciliation, that God will bring justice. And Matthew's Gospel in particular promises that God will hold people accountable for how they treated the vulnerable, as the parable of the sheep and the goats so vividly shows.¹⁴

¹⁴ Cf. Mt. 25.31-46.

The Scriptures, as I said, may almost be said to take the existence of angels for granted. And there are many people who to this day have reported encountering angels. But you can be a faithful Christian and not believe in angels; the 'existence of angels is not one of the things in which Christians must believe if they want to be saved.'¹⁵ Still, there is something to be said for angels.

For one, angels are one of the few things Christians have in common with the wider culture; much contemporary spirituality affirms that there are angels. Acknowledging that there are angels is a way to find common ground with those with whom we may not otherwise see eye to eye.

For another, the idea that angels are advocates allows us to acknowledge the suffering of the innocent, such as the children forced to attend residential schools, yet affirm without hypocrisy that God is working for justice and reconciliation, even if it is not always evident. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, 'The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.'¹⁶

The archangel Michael's role in the books of Daniel and of Revelation also remind us of the promise that the victory God won over the power of evil in the death and resurrection of Jesus, not yet final, will some day be consummated, whether we interpret that to be, as traditionally, an apocalyptic event, or, as in some contemporary theology, an emergent process.

In the climax of the book of Revelation, in a passage often read at funerals, it says:

See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.¹⁷

One way or another, justice will one day be done, fully and completely, for the victims of the residential schools, as for all innocent sufferers. The purpose of the angels who 'continually see the face of [the] Father in heaven' is to remind us that we have a part to play in making that happen.

¹⁵ FAS294.

¹⁶ For the context of this quote, see 'The Arc of the Moral Universe', Erin Rushing, *Unbound: Smithsonian Libraries and Archives*; posted 19/01/15; accessed 28/09/24; <https://blog.library.si.edu/blog/2015/01/19/the-arc-of-the-moral-universe/>.

¹⁷ Rev. 21.3-4.