

Sermon Sunday 29 September The Feast of St Michael and All Angels
St Matthew's Westminster
By The Revd Jonathan Aitken

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

Sunday 29 September 2019

**CHORAL MASS ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER
THE FEAST OF ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS**

REVELATION 12: 7-12

HEBREWS 1: 5-end

JOHN 1: 47-end

Sermon Sunday 29 September The Feast of St Michael and All Angels
St Matthew's Westminster
By The Revd Jonathan Aitken

Our readings today are all about angels.

I must confess that I have been ardently praying for their angelic assistance since being parachuted into preaching this sermon at 48 hours' notice!

That's because angelology – as scholars call the theology of angels is a complicated and confusing subject.

As our readings indicated the cast of angels include:

- Angels ascending and descending on Jacob's Ladder
- Ministering Angels sent to help us in our search for salvation
- Supernatural Angels
- Mystical Angels in flames of fire
- Incarnational Angels
- And Gladiatorial Angels

These last ones are highlighted in our reading from Revelation which tells how good and bad angels tore heaven apart in their battles.

And all that is just for starters.

When I began my urgent researches into angelology I was reminded of a visit I made some thirty years ago to Northern Ireland in the company of my then Parliamentary colleague, the Reverend Ian Paisley.

He took me on a Sunday to one of the few churches in the province which in those days still said the Athanasian Creed from the 1662 Prayer Book.

Sermon Sunday 29 September The Feast of St Michael and All Angels
St Matthew's Westminster
By The Revd Jonathan Aitken

It is a very long creed and one of its paragraphs asks the congregation to believe in:

The Father, the Incomprehensible
The Son, the Incomprehensible
The Holy Ghost, the Incomprehensible

As we were reciting these strange words a beery Ulster voice of protest rang out from the back of the Church:

"If you ask me the whole bally thing is incomprehensible".

We may have a later glance at some of the more incomprehensible New Age interpretations of angels.

We hear reports of

- Angel balloons
- Angel strobe lights
- Angel perfume (one sniff and you are in Heaven)!

A recent entrant in the Angel stakes recently reported in the tabloids and even in The Times is "The Angel of the Thames". She was alleged to be a white robed floaty lady seen hovering above the South Bank. In no time she had many psychic followers who must have been disappointed when she was unmasked as a commercial hoax by a PR company called Global Angels.

Ah well.....

Sermon Sunday 29 September The Feast of St Michael and All Angels
St Matthew's Westminster
By The Revd Jonathan Aitken

But let's move to some solid Holy ground relating to angels right here in St Matthew's.

In this service, as in all our Sunday masses, there are two profound reminders of the important relevance to our faith of angels.

In a few moments time our choir will sing the sacred words of the Sanctus:

Holy, Holy, Holy
Is the Lord God Almighty
Heaven and earth are filled
With the Majesty by Glory

Who first said that?

It comes from Isaiah Chapter 6 when the prophet is describing his famous vision.

He walked into the Temple and suddenly he was surrounded by seraphs (in Hebrew the word means "burning ones".)

They are heavenly angels flying around him, beating their six wings singing antiphonally as their three-fold repetition proclaims God's ever present holiness.

Isaiah's vision is a reminder that angels are messengers from God.

Sermon Sunday 29 September The Feast of St Michael and All Angels
St Matthew's Westminster
By The Revd Jonathan Aitken

That essential ingredient of angelology reappears in another part of our service each Sunday when we sing the Angelus which as you well know begins:

"The Angel of the Lord brought tidings to Mary
And she conceived by the Holy Spirit".

There cannot be any more important message in the theology and history of our faith. It was an Angel – the Angel Gabriel – who first communicated it.

There are several other angelic messages recorded in the Bible. For example, the story of Gideon who from a desperate position, routed Israel's enemies – the Midianites - after being told by an angel that he and his tiny number of troops could defeat the vast Midian army.

What these angelic interventions, recorded in the Bible, have in common is that they start not as reassuring signals but as deeply disturbing messages to humble individuals telling them that God wants them to do something extraordinary for him.

I will come back in a moment to the relevance of this kind of angelology to our own lives in our own times, but I suppose I would be guilty of skirting around the subject if I did not at least try to broaden out to other kinds of angels – real or imaginary.

A few hundred yards away from St Matthew's is The Tate Britain is currently holding a remarkable William Blake exhibition.

I went there on Friday, as part of my optical research for this sermon.

Sermon Sunday 29 September The Feast of St Michael and All Angels
St Matthew's Westminster
By The Revd Jonathan Aitken

William Blake was an extraordinary artist, poet and mystic whose visionary inspirations included writing the words of Jerusalem.

He dreamed dreams and saw visions which frequently focused on angels. It would probably be fair to call Blake an angel obsessive.

In Blake's world there were good angels and bad angels. I savoured one particularly vivid portrait of these two combative angels fighting for the possession of a new born baby (*The Good And Evil Angels Struggling For Possession Of A Child* circa 1795). A wonderful painting.

Now William Blake is not the only obsessive angel watcher.

You don't have to be a mystic or a psychic to wonder whether in modern times whether our contemporary lives could be touched by:

Guardian angels,
Angels of Mercy,
Angels who do good deeds or
Angels who provide food and drink.

There are plenty of stories about these, some of them with good Biblical roots.

Let us not forget that Jesus after his bruising and tempting encounters with Satan in the wilderness was rescued by angels, who in the words of the King James Bible "ministered unto him".

Here at St Matthew's we pride ourselves on having a ministry of hospitality. Our inspiration for this comes from a great verse from Hebrews:

Sermon Sunday 29 September The Feast of St Michael and All Angels
St Matthew's Westminster
By The Revd Jonathan Aitken

“Do not be afraid to offer hospitality to strangers, for in doing so you may be entertaining angels unawares”.

By the way do come to refreshments after this service - you never know who you may meet!

The serious point that I am trying to make is that alongside the great traditional depictions of angels such as Gabriel making the annunciation to Mary or Isaiah surrounded by Seraphims and Cherubims singing the Sanctus, there may well be perfectly ordinary humdrum people acting angelically and so doing God's work in everyday life.

One of these reasons why I believe in ordinary as well as extraordinary angels is because in my childhood, I was told an angel story by the most down to earth non mystical, non-superstitious person I ever knew – my Canadian Father.

He called it “the Story of the Spitfire Angel” and I will tell it to you now:

(Tell World War II of my father's squadron and the missing pilot shepherded home by the spitfire angel).

Now, perhaps I have given you too much of an angelic feast in this season on the Feast of St Michael and All Angels.

And we should be cautious because this is a subject where the frontiers of mythology and theology can be blurred.

Sermon Sunday 29 September The Feast of St Michael and All Angels
St Matthew's Westminster
By The Revd Jonathan Aitken

But to avoid stumbling into the quick sands of easy believism, let me end by getting back to the great truths contained in the Angelus and the Sanctus and say why they are so relevant to our lives.

In both the cases God sends his angels to tell a nobody that he or she was a somebody, in God's sight.

God's call is often like that,

Disturbing and
Unnerving

In its summons to His service.

God uses an angel, a messenger, to lift us out of

- Our rut
- Our poor self imagery,
- Our insecurities,
- And our low self esteem.

The young Isaiah was a sinful "man of unclean lips".

Mary was a frightened peasant girl.

When Gabriel arrived to address her as

"O favoured one"
And "blessed among women"

Sermon Sunday 29 September The Feast of St Michael and All Angels
St Matthew's Westminster
By The Revd Jonathan Aitken

She surely could not have felt she was either of those things before the angelic messenger arrived.

But whether they arrive in ancient times or modern times, God's angels seem to carry more or less the same kind of message which is:

That message is:

"I have something quite extraordinary for you to do, but do not be afraid for the Lord is with you".

If we hear such a message, may we respond obediently like Isaiah:

"Here am I send me",

Or like Mary

"Be it unto me according to thy word".

Amen