MICHAELMASS.

Sermon preached at St Michael and All Angels, Christchurch, 29 September, 2025

by Fr Peter Williams.

*(Readings: Genesis 28:10–17; Revelation 12:7–12; John 1:47–51)*

On this St Michael’s day, our Patronal festival, we are gathered here with each other, with some guests and visitors, and “with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven”, to worship God the Holy Trinity. God, who is the very ground of our being, the infinite and immortal one, whose loving centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

As we celebrate this Mass together, and celebrate the greatness of God’s name, we are drawn into the deepest mystery that there is. And here we inevitably find ourselves singing and talking of angels and perhaps even encountering them.

Scripture speaks of angels with many names: messengers, ministers, watchers, guardians, hosts, powers. Sometimes they appear dazzling and strange, as at the empty tomb or in Isaiah’s vision of the temple filled with smoke. Sometimes they arrive quietly, disguised as travellers, or whisper in a dream.

When we have in some way been touched by the mercy of God, or when we are overcome by a sense that things are much more than they seem, we may well find that we begin talking of angels. We need another language, one that stretches vastly enough to hint at what we cannot fully name. And angels may be one of the ways of expressing our sense of the infinitely various and unexpected action of the loving God that creation shimmers with, and that we may come to encounter in manifold ways as our faith deepens.

We may come to find that divine mercy is at play not only in the great turning points of history but also in the quiet details of our lives: a word of encouragement, an unlooked-for kindness, the courage to take the next step. Angels help us to understand and live with all that.

Rather than giving us a precise map of the heavenly hierarchy, the Bible invites us to see angels as signs of something all-pervasive and profound; they point beyond themselves to the endlessly varied action of the living God whose love sustains all things.

There was Jacob, on the run, sleeping with a stone for a pillow; he sees a ladder set on earth reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. The vision is not about spiritual air traffic, but about the fact that there is no gap between God’s life and ours. Heaven leans close to earth. God’s presence is at work, weaving through the commonplace — even through a fugitive’s night on hard ground.

The seer of Revelation pictures Michael and his angels fighting against the powers of destruction. The story is told in battle-language, but its meaning is hope: there is more to reality than the forces that wound or diminish. God’s creative love is never absent, even when conflict or grief seem to have the upper hand.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus promises Nathanael that he will see “heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Here the ladder becomes a person, **Christ himself**. Christ himself is the meeting point of heaven and earth, the place where God’s grace is poured into the world.

And there are very many other stories about angels and people in the scriptures, stories that we know well.

One angel is visiting Joseph, whose fiancée is pregnant - without his having done anything that might result in that condition: at least as far as he can recall.

Another is having a heart-to heart with Mary as she puzzles about the child growing inside her.

There are several angels making a big noise on a hillside on the outskirts of Bethlehem to some puzzled shepherds.

There is one on the mount of Olives with Jesus on the threshold of his arrest and execution; and there are one or two with Mary Magdalen and the other women at an empty tomb: women who are wondering whether some cruel hoax has been played on them.

You may see that all these people have one thing in common: all of them, every one, is standing at a boundary place in their life, with unknown territory beyond; at a threshold opening they know not where. Joseph standing at the boundary between suspicion and trust. Mary standing at the boundary between doubt and faith. The shepherds at the boundary between indifference and wonder… Jesus at the boundary between life and death; the women at the boundary between utter desolation and resurrection joy.

All of them are looking back on what has happened in their lives, everything that has gone before, and they are asking: What has it all been about? And they’re saying: Given all that has been, can I really step forward in faith into an unknown future?

**And it is there that the angels are; there at the boundary-places of human experience.**

And strangely enough, in that place all these angels say the same thing; they all declare to the people on a threshold: **Don’t be afraid**. **Don’t be afraid,** it’s God’s future you are stepping into, and God’s purposes are sure. All things are working together for good. **Don’t be afraid**.

Michaelmas, then, calls us to be attentive to these thresholds, at which each of us stands to some extent, at the changing moments of our lives, even if we are unaware of it.

It calls us to a kind of attentive hospitality towards the people and events around us, and the strange stirrings inside us. To be open to God’s messengers in the world around us: in those who quietly bring hope where there is misery, in the strength of those who serve the vulnerable, in the beauty of creation, in the joyful energy of the liturgy, in the stillness that lets us pray, in all those people and happenings that nudge and guide and even lead us through difficult thresholds to new life beyond. There, angels continually remind us that our lives are held within heaven’s life, and we need not be afraid, though we may have to be brave.

Accordingly, the Letter to the Hebrews summons us “to show hospitality to **strangers**, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.” In so doing, we may be helped over a threshold or may help another over one. And that is, in the Bible, the work of angels.

And we must not forget that Michaelmas also calls us to wider responsibility in this respect. For if angels are signs of God’s mercy and courage at the world’s boundary-places, then we who worship the Lord of angels are called to share in that angelic role ourselves. To stand wisely and generously at the thresholds of our own time:

At this moment, in all that is happening in the world and in our own country, there is much that concerns and horrifies us. Especially because in all of that there are millions of people forced to stand at boundary places of conflict, poverty, unemployment, homelessness, exclusion, untruth, and so much else.

At these and many other boundaries, we may prefer silence or retreat, but we may be called to speak and act with the courage of Michael and all the angels: to say in word and show in deed, *Do not be afraid. God is here. God’s future is breaking in.*

So today we give thanks for Michael and all angels, but more: we accept the challenge to share in God’s angelic work in the world.

Let us go from this feast ready to carry light into the shadows, hope into despair, and love into every place of fear.

For the One who orders the galaxies also sends us — frail as we are — to stand at the boundaries of our age and bear witness that Christ is Lord, and his kingdom cannot be overcome.

All this in the name of Christ, with us here tonight, the ladder between heaven and earth, the Lord of the angels. Amen.