

Sermon for the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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Today is the feast of St. Michael and All Angels, commonly called Michaelmas. It is also our patronal feast, St. Michael being our particular patron, since the Holy Nativity is not a person who intercedes for us before the throne of God. Michael the archangel is not a saint in the same way men can be saints. However, the word saint simply means “holy”, so somewhere along the way it was applied to the names of angels as well as holy men. Hence, the archangels: St. Michael, St. Gabriel, and St. Raphael. These are the only holy angels actually named in scripture, although there are a couple other names traditionally applied to angelic beings, like Uriel. But today, we also honor all the holy angels of God whose names we do not know.

The Greek word “angelos” means simply a “messenger”. So anyone can be referred to as an “angelos” if he bears a message from someone else. However, the word is also used in a technical sense to mean specifically a “messenger of God”, a non-corporeal being of spiritual intelligence created by God to serve him in the heavenly realm.

Now, I want to set a couple things straight right off the bat. First, angels are a separate order of created beings. You will never become an angel. Your children, no matter how kind or beautiful, are not now and never will be angels. At one point, Jesus says that we will be *like* the angels in a particular way. That is, we won’t get married. But angels do not become men, and men do not become angels.

Secondly, think of all the images of angels that you have seen: the voluptuous women with wings, the pudgy children with wings, all the saccharine visual trash that passes for depiction of angels. Now mentally take all the trash out to the curb and leave it there. Angels do not have physical bodies, but they can make themselves apparent to the human eye. And when they do, it generally is not a pleasant experience. The biblical evidence is that, if you saw an angel, you would probably be scared out of your pants. They are constantly having to start conversations with “Don’t be afraid!”

One of the most common ways angels are referred to in scripture is as God’s army. When God is called the “Lord of hosts”, it means “master of armies”. And we’re not talking about just any armies. We’re talking about the “heavenly hosts”, the armies of angels. Holy Michael himself is the commander of the angelic armies. And in our St Michael window, he is armed for battle, leading the hosts of heaven to the defense of God’s people and striking down the devil.

Besides being spiritual warriors, angels mediate God's power and love to us in a number of ways. Sometimes they defend us from the attacks of Satan directly. At other times, they are the bearers of strength and sustenance to us, as we take up our part in the spiritual battle, working out our salvation "in fear and trembling" and sweat. They served Our Lord after his fast in the desert. And they certainly play the role of messenger for which they are named. When God wants to be absolutely clear in his messages, like when announcing the birth of the Messiah, he often sends an angel.

But the most important thing that angels do is to express the glory and majesty of God in worship. The book of Revelation is full of it. "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty!" And "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!" We join them in the Mass: "Therefore, with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven..." Our worship is a participation in the constant, eternal, heavenly worship surrounding the throne of God.

However, worship is not merely a liturgical event. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War, said this about worship: "To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God." In other words, to worship is to enter into the immediate Presence of God and then act accordingly.

In the presence of God we are immediately made conscious of our own fallenness and need for redemption. Worship is the discipline in which we allow God's presence to drive us to our knees in repentance, in which we submit ourselves to the truth. We reign in our own pride and self-importance, and we open ourselves to the white-hot furnace of God's love, in which our many cherished impurities are seared away. Finally, we set aside our own fallen desires and direct our wills toward obedience.

This is what we learn from the angels. Worship is not merely the activity of prayer and praise. The holy angels exist constantly in a *state* of worship. All the activity in which they engage, the fighting, the serving, the carrying of messages; all of this is essentially worship, because they are not merely about those activities. They are about doing God's will perfectly. Because the angels are not fallen, their worship is simply a state of being. It is, in a sense, who and what they are. We, on the other hand, must painfully subordinate and straighten our own twisted wills to the will of God. For us, worship, maintaining a submitted heart, is a discipline.

This discipline of worship is primary. Without it there is no point in doing anything else. That is why, at the very beginning of the Mass, after asking God to cleanse our thoughts, we remind ourselves of this primary duty. “Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.” Worship first. Only then will you be able to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

It is this discipline of worship for which we deploy all the tools at our disposal on Sunday morning. Vestments, architecture, bells. Music, incense. We physically represent the motions with our bodies: sit, stand, kneel. The Lord himself provides us bread and wine which become his actual physical presence. The liturgy takes us through the movements of worship: hearing the truth; responding in prayer, praise, and repentance; taking God into our very selves. The celebrant says, “Lift up your hearts.” That doesn’t mean, “Everyone feel warm and fuzzy, now.” It means, “Offer up your heart in joyful sacrifice, and let God straighten you out!” And we all respond in obedience, “We lift them up unto the Lord.”

All of this trains us up in the motions of worship. We rehearse and enact it together every week. We enter into the liturgy with the holy angels and all the company of heaven, in order to learn from them the discipline of worship. But the form itself is not worship. Worship is what happens inside us when we internalize the form. When the motions become a part of us, ebbing and flowing through our days and nights, like the tide. When we learn to repent of our impatience right there in the check-out line. When we learn to thank God for our children, even after one of them has wrecked the car. When we learn to give up control of our money, and not worry about whether God will care for our needs. When we learn to listen to the voice of Reality himself in every hour, and strive to do what he asks of us. That is worship. And that is the primary discipline to which we are called.

On the other hand, the purpose of all discipline is freedom. The great pianist disciplines himself in order to be free to play Rachmaninov. The runner disciplines his body for the freedom it gives him to run faster. The discipline of worship frees us to be who we truly are. It frees us to live a life in the fellowship of God’s loving presence. It frees us to be good stewards of creation. It frees us to live as God intended. The holy angels are perfectly free, because they are perfectly obedient, without any desire for rebellion.

The power of God is available to us. The angels are always there to assist us. God is always ready to help us to obey him. He wants us to be free and whole. And he will make it so, if we are willing to follow our patron, Holy Michael, in casting down the forces of evil, starting with those within ourselves.