

## Homily for Michelmas

Today we feast the angels, today the readings are full of angels and dragons, casting out and overcoming, offences and drowning in the depths of the sea, cutting off hands and feet, hell fire and the kingdom of heaven. Is it a wonder that we are invited to become as little children as we listen to the gospel as it is presented on this feast day?

Angels and dragons, kingdoms and dangers are the stuff children are ready and willing to fathom. They hear the clarion call of adventure and their hearts leap to join the fray. They make great plans and imagine great things. We too might still feel our hearts leap when there is talk of war on dragons and of lives full of risk, but allowing these longings to impact our daily existence...that is another matter

The difficulty is that we are not children, we sit here either in early adulthood trying to grapple with what it means to take responsibility for our lives in an uncertain world, in middle adulthood, wearied and worried by the changes and changes of this fleeting existence or in older adulthood looking out toward the end and feeling the lessening of our life energy. We deal with difficulties we must conquer, diagnoses we must manage, depression we must fight, and dementia we must cure, we do not deal with angels and demons. What is Jesus asking of us, as the people we are in this moment, on this feast day?

Here the beginning of the gospel again

At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.

Now I think the tradition has a habit of disparaging the disciples for asking this question.

We now believe they asked the wrong question, we Christian folk know we should not seek to be the greatest but the least, the servants of all. We should seek humility. The scriptural witness shows that there is great truth in this conclusion. But it is a risky truth to apply hastily. The primary reason it is risky is because we have no clue how to 'seek to be humble'. Humility is not an act of the will. And when we attempt to will ourselves into humility, when we attempt to make ourselves humble we often get filled with guilt and make a proud mess of it all.

Children don't try to be humble, they are too busy falling down and getting up again and pursuing greatness in their adventures and imaginations. What is it that they have that we do not? Jesus is not commending their innocence, we all know that we cannot return to that so what is it, what is the substance of humility? The substance of childlike humility is trust. How do we learn to trust? Today we feast the angels and I believe that they can show us the lost art of trust.

There are almost 300 references to Angels in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. In these references angels are either in heaven filled with fire and love and given over to worship or they come to humanity, to instruct, help, defend, comfort. Angels act in heaven and they act on earth. There are fallen angels in the scripture story, primarily one named Lucifer or Satan, who falls from heaven like lightning, who was in heaven in the form of a dragon and fought a war against the angels of heaven. This same dragon was cast out of heaven by Michael onto earth along with other angels which followed him. The book of Revelation is full of Angels acting, speaking, defending, and attending in worship to the God of all creation. In the scriptures heaven and earth are thick with spiritual beings.

There are a myriad of references to Angels in the scriptures however there is not a lot of content about the nature of angels. They are ephemeral and elusive to our understanding. Sometimes their beauty and awe-inspiring appearance is haltingly described but everything about heavenly angels points to the holy glory of God or to God's love and providential help to humanity and creation. All that we know of angels slips through our understanding into the mystery of God. Angels are iridescent glory and they are transparent to God, God is so obviously the actor in the being of angels. We cannot grasp God this makes angels hard to grasp.

The church from its inception into the middle ages made much of angels and the devil. It sought to understand them and to describe them. You see this in the art and liturgy of the church, you hear it in all of the spiritual teachings of the early theologians. Spiritual reality permeates earthly reality, it is taken seriously by paupers, politicians and all people.

Since the reformation we have gone quiet about Angels and demons. Perhaps, too much had been said about a mystery. Human power used ideas and imaginings about angels and demons to control and act in cruelty. Things got too volatile. Perhaps the angel of the age struck us all dumb on the subject for a time to chasten our thinking and talking about powers beyond our ken. This might have been important.

But now perhaps the devil has taken up our reluctance to speak of that which we do not understand and fostered a dramatic disappearance of angels and demons from our understanding of the work of God in the world. It seems the devil has made sure that what is left behind in our imagination and our occasional talk are silly cherubs, pretty protectors to offer sweet weak consolations and horror movies which make us fearful but do not speak the truth. These caricatures make it so that we who pride ourselves on our minds and take ourselves seriously and live in the rational world are quite certain that this room and the whole earth is empty of spiritual reality, not thick with presences that we cannot understand.

But this has, along with many other subtle shifts in our modern world view and cultural imagination lead to a sense that we are alone, that we are in control, that everything is malleable, and that nothing is beyond our range of discovery. We have come into the adulthood of our humanity and vanquished the angels, the demons, perhaps even an idea of God and we are alone. We are so very alone. There is no one to trust. So, we hear the invitation again.

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said. Verily I say unto you, Except you be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and

that he were drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe unto the world because of offences; for it must needs be that offences come, but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh.

Now, hold back on assuming the position of the adult, one who might offend and have a millstone hung around her neck and be drowned for that offense. Instead take the position of the child as you are invited to do. Let the passage speak to you the child before you try to make yourself humble and get very afraid of having to cut off your hand or your foot so that you won't be thrown into hell.

Look at what is happening to the child. Jesus Christ, the God of all creation has just stood between the child and anyone who would hurt the child or mislead the child, beyond our reading for today the passage will go on to say that when that child is lost and confused, the shepherd will seek for that child and find it and when that child gets into debt way over her head, that debt will be forgiven. This child is beloved, this child is defended and how is this manifest in the world you ask?

Jesus says: Take heed that ye despise not one of these little one; for I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.

Did you hear that, the child, that is you, has an angel, with him at every moment looking at the face of God and caring for his soul. Sergei Bulgakov the great Russian theologian makes a beautifully crafted and well-grounded description of the nature of the relationship between a human and her guardian angel. He says that just as humans are made in the image of God, so are the angels. Just so, there are two created manifestations of the image of God which are intended to fulfill the same work of God in creation, one is angelic, one is human. What he is claiming is that each human in all of history has a particular guardian angel. Humans live in time and though we are known in God from the beginning, we come into our life at birth, bearing the image of God. and we have a limited time of action in the world. Our guardian angel on the other hand exists outside of time, and therefore this angel is present to all time. So now I want you to imagine your angel has been ready for you since time began acting in the love of God for the fulfillment of the work of God in your life. I also want you to imagine that beyond your death that same angel continues to participate in the fulfillment of glory that you were given to be in God.

Now I don't want you to think of your fulfillment as your destiny, fate, or your predetermined life, instead I want you to imagine that the fulfillment of you, the good of you is particular but it is not fixed, it is known as your fullness within the wholeness of the Good which is in Christ but it isn't prescribed in detail, there is freedom here, you aren't going to miss your life if you choose one thing and not another, you cannot choose a wrong path which will determine your destiny because on that 'wrong' path, God is still there inviting you into love and goodness. The most common word spoken by angels is Do Not Be Afraid. The angels are inviting us to trust, to relinquish our fear and follow our life as it is given.

You are being invited to attune your life to good that already exists, it is already working everywhere. You are not being asked to make your life but rather you are being asked to participate in it. Open yourself to the gift of your life, let it surprise you, don't resist it, don't hold onto some idealized image of your life so that you miss the good given to you when it is all falling apart all around you. You have been known from the foundation of the world because Christ is the good, the fulfillment

of all of us. He is the all human. And the Trinitarian God in mercy created angels and humans, spiritual beings and physical beings in God's image and we were given to work together to realize the Goodness of God, our fulfillment, together in time.

So, try again, imagine that a particular spiritual being has been loving, and acting and expecting your arrival from the beginning of time, and when you die that angel still is, because that angel is not in time. Perhaps your fulfillment, your good was thwarted or not completely made full, perhaps you made mistakes and sinned and harm was done, perhaps your ego got in the way and you just couldn't see the good that was given. This angel is before God, in heaven and present to earth to participate in the forgiveness and action which will bring the fullness of your life into reality in eternity. That angel can slay dragons. As a parent I know some of the mistakes I have made and feel profound regret and sadness, but I am daily coming to truly trust that there is grace and forgiveness. It is helpful and it encourages profound transformation in me to realize that even after my death, my angel will help work out the wrongs done in the generations which will come after me. This work of forgiveness and restoration is so hard and sometimes so sad, but it is happening and what I am asked to do is not to make it happen but to participate in that happening, to trust in its happening.

Bulgakov uses the parable of the wheat and the tares to give theological ground for this idea, in that parable Jesus says that the wheat is to grow with the weeds within it and at the end of time the angels will come and separate the wheat from the tares. Bulgakov says 'the image of the harvest in which the angels separate the weeds from the wheat and burn the weeds speaks precisely about this activity of the angels who gather and thereby fulfill and correct the works of the children of human kind'

We are loved and prepared for before we are born, cared for, protected and helped during our lifetime and after our death, the mistakes we have left behind will continue to be worked at and restored. Perhaps this is what judgement is, it is the process of purgation, waiting and watching while our acts are forgiven, restored and completed in Christ, enacted by our Angel on earth.

Now, let us return to what is being asked of us. What is it to be humble, to approach our lives like children in this context? Perhaps it is to acknowledge that we are not in complete control, we cannot anticipate all the possibilities, we are not alone, and we are not in charge. What would happen if we stopped trying so hard to make our lives and instead tried to attune to our lives, to the natural world around us, to the spiritual world around us. What if we listened, if we waited, what if we tried to trust, what would happen? What if when life fell down around our ears or we sensed that we had made a dreadful mistake, instead of defending ourselves and staying in our guilt we listened for the wisdom that is near us, we took the path of restoration when it was made visible to us, the path of forgiveness. What if we trusted that this path was well provisioned, that we would be helped to take the next step what if we trusted that healing might be possible, what would happen?

Today we feast the angels. Today we are invited to come into life like little children, to dream of greatness, and to be humble enough to realize that that greatness is found in trust in that which is beyond us and in the grace that surrounds us, in the coinherence of all time and the coinherence of heaven and earth. Today we feast the angels who are iridescent and transparent to the God who has loved each one of us from the foundation of the world and it is good.

