

Saint Thomas' Church
Michaelmas
September 29, 2019
rmcneely+

Today's celebration of the Eucharist is unusual.
Unusual in that the feast of St Michael and All Angels rarely falls
on a Sunday. So today we step aside from our Trinity Survey of
Christian Doctrine to consider a rare subject:
Michael the Archangel and All Angels.

In the not too distant past today was known as Michaelmas
Short for Michael's Mass.
Celebrated each year on September 29th
It had special societal significance beyond the religious
purpose.
You see, our ancestors lived their religion
And it was a part of their daily lives
Integrated in virtually everything they did.

We have become "enlightened" and grown away from that life.

In England the ancient tradition was that the year was divided into
quarters; four periods, each of three months
That roughly corresponded to the four seasons
And roughly corresponded to the occurrence
of those celestial times during the year
when the day and the night were of exactly equal duration
(the Autumnal Equinox and the Vernal Equinox)
and when the daylight was shortest; the Winter solstice
when the daylight was the longest; the Summer Solstice.

The day that ended each quarter of the year was known as a
quarterly day.

The quarterly days had legal and societal significance:

On the quarterly day all debts were paid
 All rents were due
 All leases were entered into and so those that expired did so
 on a quarterly day.

Servants were hired
 In the fields, one harvest cycle ended and a new one began
 The Courts began a new term on the quarterly day
 And universities began their term on quarterly days.

The ancient Church celebrated these days with special communion services at approximately the same time as solar events

June 24 for the summer solstice was the MidSummer Mass
 September 29th for the Autumnal Equinox was Michaelmas
 December 25th for the winter solstice, Christmas Day
 March 25 for the Vernal Equinox on Lady's Day

They even named a Fall flower: Michaelmas Daisies to mark the day. Those are the purple daisies at the altar today.

We were formerly connected to the land

To the environment,
 The seasons
 The solar events of the year.

And we marked our lives with Christian observance
 It was all one, the earth, the universe and life with God.

Can we restore it here at St Thomas' for an hour on Sunday?

Today, September 29th would have been a quarterly day
 and still marks

the end of Summer and the beginning of Fall.
 The Autumnal Equinox

And is marked by the celebration of Michaelmas

Let's leave the historic societal and cultural significance of Michaelmas and consider it's namesake: Angels and Michael, the Archangel.

Mankind has long pondered the existence of angels.

They are frequent visitors in the ancient texts

like the Torah,

the Pentateuch,

the Old Testament.

People have been writing about angels for thousands of years.

What we know about angels we have learned

from Holy Scripture

And occasionally from our own experience.

We fantasize about them but they are no fantasy.

We imagine them but they are no imagining.

The Old Testament record is replete with accounts of angels
appearing to

Abraham

Hagar

Lot

Jacob

Moses

Balaam

Joshua

All Israel

Gideon

Manoah

David

Elijah

Daniel

Zechariah

The New Testament is replete with accounts of angels appearing to:

Zechariah the father of John the Baptist
 The Virgin Mary
 Joseph
 The Shepherds at the Nativity
 Mary Magdalene
 The Apostles
 to: Peter
 Philip
 Cornelius
 Paul
 John
 The seven churches in Revelation

We know they are heavenly and eternal beings created by God and they do His will.

What else do we know about them?

We know they are an higher order, created
 Above mankind
 Below Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit.

We know they are able to transport themselves across distance and space

In a manner we think of as flight.
 So for centuries artists have portrayed them with birdlike wings.

They are spiritual beings, invisible
 and yet we know they can take human form.

They have powers of vast destruction
 And have used them to do the will of God
 Destroying enemies in the defense of the Children of God
 And wreaking punishment on transgressors

So much so that people were terrified of them
And when they made a benevolent appearance
The first thing they said was: “fear not”.

We know that they imparted messages from God
Gabriel’s visit with Mary and later Joseph
In fact the word ‘angel’ is a Greek word meaning messenger.

We know they are sometimes our protectors
Defending us from evil
Restoring us to the pathway to God.

We know there is a hierarchy
And that Archangels command ranks of angels

We even know some of their names
The Bible has introduced us to
Michael
Gabriel
Lucifer, more about him in minute

The Apocrypha has given us two more
Raphael
Ariel

Legend gives us three more
Jophiel
Chamiel
Zadkiel

Michael is associated with the heavenly host
God’s army of angels.

We see him in Revelation
leading the spiritual battle with Satan
He guards Daniel and his friends from the lions and the furnace
During the Babylonian Exile

In the New Testament book of Jude
Michael guards the tombs of Moses and Mary
From the assaults of satan.

So Michael is seen by our Roman Catholic cousins
As the Champion of Christians.

We see Gabriel in the intimacy of the annunciation to Mary
The messages to Joseph concerning the nativity
The protection
Or Our Lord in His infancy
It was Gabriel who announced the birth of Christ to the Shepherds
Of Bethlehem.

It was Gabriel who told Zechariah that Elizabeth would
Bear a son
Who would be the herald of the Messiah
His name would be John, we call him John, the Baptist

We know angels have free will, much like us
We know the story of Lucifer
An archangel
Who became taken up with his great beauty
And succumbed to the sin of pride.
He thought himself equal or superior to God
And led a rebellion of angels
to place Lucifer on the throne of God
He and his minions became the force of evil in the world.

So we know from scripture
that angels have been a force in the world.

Are they now?

Do angels still exist in our lives?
Are they part of our lives today, here in this great City
named for a Saint?

In the Book of Hebrews, Saint Paul cautioned us
To “be not forgetful to entertain strangers
For thereby some have
Entertained angels unawares”.

Have any of you had the sense, as I have
That a person unknown to you
May be that angel that Paul wrote about.
That person who has something about them
A bearing
A look in the eye
A sense of peace and calm power about them
A loving intensity.

You encounter them and your soul immediately leaps up
And you wonder whether you are in the company
Of an angel?

I would love to hear your stories. Join me for coffee sometime and
tell me your story of the angels in your life.

But let me tell you a story told by my friend Ralph.
Some of you may recall that I hold a private pilot’s license and
flew single engine airplanes for about 30 years in my younger
days. I flew a complex single engine Cessna that was owned by
my friend Ralph. The airplane was fully equipped and rated to fly
in instrument conditions, which Ralph did often.

One night Ralph was returning alone to Concord, from a trip to
Seattle. The weather forecast was poor but above instrument
minimums so Ralph filed an instrument flight plan and all was well
as he left Seattle, transited Portland and crossed into California
near Yreka.

He was on the flight plan and communicating with Air Traffic Control at his assigned altitude of 9,000 ft. He was, as expected in the clouds with no visibility, but was precisely on the airway when he encountered a problem. He found he had to increase power to maintain altitude. Ralph got out his flashlight and shined it on the leading edge of the wing. His heart raced. Ice was forming on the leading edge and likely on the propeller and the air intake.

The weather forecast had not indicated icing conditions but Ralph was flying in a cloud that had low temperatures and enough water to form ice.

The airplane had no de-icing equipment and would lose lift and add weight leading to an “off airport” landing. Pilot talk for a crash. There were only two alternatives:

Ralph needed to make a 180 degree turn back to warmer and dryer conditions, or

Descend where the temperature is above freezing.

But there are two problems with either maneuver in the dark and in a cloud with zero visibility;

First is collision with another airplane flying the same airway.

The second is terrain. Somewhere to his right were the 9,000 ft high Trinity Alps and somewhere to his left was a big rock. 14,000 ft high Mt Shasta. In the dark and in zero visibility, Ralph needed clearance for either maneuver and radar vectors to avoid aircraft and terrain.

He keyed the mike, declared the emergency and waited for ATC. No response. He called again. He could hear the controller talking to other pilots but there was no response to his priority emergency call. He switched to the second radio thinking maybe the transmitter of number one was out. No response.

The airplane was loading up with ice and slowly descending now under full power.

Desperate, his repeated transmissions got no response.

Ralph uttered a prayer. He needed help.

Just then a pilot flying northbound in a twin engine Beechcraft could hear Ralph's desperation and relayed Ralph's situation to ATC. The controller responded by clearing traffic below and gave both a clearance to descend and radar vectors to avoid terrain. The twin Beech pilot relayed the clearance to Ralph.

He descended to warmer air, the ice melted and Ralph was saved. Now, this is where the story gets interesting.

The next day, Ralph contacted the ATC Center to learn the name of the pilot who had helped him. Ralph remembered the call sign of the twin Beech, the time and the place. But the FAA record bank had no such airplane in the sky that night. There was not even a twin Beech flying anywhere in Northern California or Southern Oregon that night.

Ralph was not a church going man in those days, but you will never convince him that his prayer was not answered. He will tell you he was saved by an angel.

So are there angels amongst us?
You tell me.

The presence of angels is another comforting reminder of just how much God loves us.

They are also ethereal reminders that we too are created to do the will of God in our lives.

