



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Feast of St. Michael & All Angels, Trinity XVIII, September 29nd, 2013

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

It's quite amazing the thing folks choose to disbelieve about the Christian faith. For example, long, long ago – in the dime and distant past – a small group of ladies approached me to complain about a lay reader who was leading a bible study.

I was really surprise because I'd always considered him a rather knowledgeable chap and an interesting and challenging teacher. "What's the problem?" I asked. "He's hopelessly naïve," they replied, "He even believes in angels!"

"So did Jesus," I pointed out. "There are many references to angels both in the Old and New Testaments. I really can't believe that God is hopelessly naïve. Can you?"

I wasn't exaggerating. The Bible makes mention of them on numerous occasions, including the dramatic reference to them in the passage from the Revelation of St. John the divine that serves for the Epistle on today's Feast of St. Michael and All Angels.

Indeed, references to Angels permeate the Scriptures from one end to the other -- from the Book of Genesis to Revelations. In fact, the first is to be found at the very beginning of God's revelation of himself to mankind. The Book of Genesis tells us after God chucked

Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, he put Cherubim with flaming swords at the gates to make sure they stayed out.

Despite this, disbelief in angels is by no means confined to those skeptical ladies. Many folks – Protestants, particularly – appear to write them off as the religious equivalent of the tooth fairy – lumping them into the same category as hobbits, elves and pixies: "vain superstitions."

Perhaps a major reason for this is the way we talk about them and the way they are portrayed artistically. After all, people engaged in a meaningless debate over a pointless question are said to be arguing "the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin." What's more, in both serious art and cartoons they are all too often depicted as little fat babies with shiny bottoms or simpering hermaphrodites, more suited to advertising baby formula than playing around with flaming swords. And one has to admit it's hard to take such outlandish creatures entirely seriously.

But how accurate are these portrayals? Such imagery is very far from Scriptural reality. The first words usually uttered by angels to human beings are: "Fear not." And not unreasonably: Read the Bible and you'll find out that angels are terrifying beings.

The Prophet Ezekiel, for example, describes Cherubim at length. Here's a sample:

"They had the likeness of a man. Each one had four faces, and each one had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the soles of calves' feet. They sparkled like the color of burnished bronze. They had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides . . . each had the face of a man, each of the four had the face of a lion on the right side, each of the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and each of the four had the face of an eagle . . ."

I wouldn't want to meet them on a dark night any more than Isaiah's Seraphim: "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above it stood six seraphim: each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew."

Then there is St. Stephen, our patron saint. At his trial, he was described as having the face of an angel and there was nothing girly or infantile about it. The speech he delivered in his defense devastated his accusers, intellectually and theologically. Its eloquence drove them into a fury of hatred so intense they dragged him outside and stoned him to death. If Stephen had the face of an angel it was an avenging angel.

Now let us consider the description in the Book of Revelations of the war in heaven between St. Michael and his Angels and Satan and his angels during the time that Christ lay in the tomb. Are we to take it literally or as allegory or is it simply irrelevant in this day and age? Nothing in The Bible is irrelevant. And it is no accident that the reading from Revelation is coupled with a reading from the 18th chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel – one that reminds us of Jesus' warning: "Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall by no means enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

When Jesus tells us to be like little children the qualities he's looking for are not pouting and petulance, but humility, tractability and readiness to learn. And in this regard, our problems in believing in angels are entirely of our own making. If we accept that God created the heaven and the earth "and all that therein is" we should have no trouble whatsoever in accepting the fact that he is also perfectly capable of creating Angels. It surely can't be intrinsically any more difficult to create an angel than to create a man. Actually, there's a good case for thinking that, for some one as infinitely powerful as God, it would be absolute child's play.

But one of the drawbacks to being human is we tend to look at everything from our own perspective. We judge God's creative act against our own limited ability to function creatively. We look at the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection and we say to ourselves: "Wow, isn't that awesome!"

We're right, of course. It is awesome – awe-inspiring and quite frightening. It is so far removed from anything that we ourselves can do that it boggles the mind. But we should not confuse the things that we are able to do with the things God can do. To be sure, virgin births and resurrections are well beyond our capabilities. But such acts are certainly not beyond God's capabilities. They are, in fact, exactly the sort of activity any reasonable person should expect God to get up to.

When Jesus tells us to "Render unto Caesar those things which be Caesars and unto God the things which be God's" he isn't just talking about money. He is also telling us we shouldn't make the mistake of confusing our own puny abilities with the limitless abilities and capabilities of our maker. *AMEN*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.