

Sermon: Sunday 20 September 2018 – Feast of Michael and All Angels
St. John the Evangelist Toorak
Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:1-12; Mark 9:30-37

I'm regularly struck by the fact that, in American TV shows of various fiction genres, you cannot disprove the existence of angels. There is regularly a mysterious figure that comes and helps and then disappears. It seems very important to maintain faith in these otherworldly figures.

Angels remain in the popular imagination as protectors and important guides at crucial times in a persons' life, whether you use the term to refer to other humans or beings beyond our understanding.

Today we celebrate the feast of Michael and All Angels, messengers of God.

The Book of Revelation uses all sorts of imagery to put into words concerns on a cosmic scale.

In the part of the Book we heard today, we hear about Michael expelling Satan from heaven. Michael leads God's forces of good. These forces can triumph over the powers of evil because the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, has died and risen again for us.

The battle described did not literally take place, but angels and archangels appear throughout the Bible.

These figures act on behalf of God and help share God's message with humans as needed.

Today, as we celebrate Michael and All Angels, I would like to explore with you what God's angels might mean for us today, and as an anchor for this, I will refer to our own church building.

The full name of the Angel chapel off to my left is in fact "Chapel of St. Michael and All Angels."

It was given as a gift to the parish of St. John's in 1937.

This worship space is used regularly for prayer, services of Holy Communion, baptisms and occasionally small funerals and weddings.

While sitting in this space, one is surrounded by images that call us to reflect on the role of God's messengers.

Four archangels in particular adorn our chapel, Michael of course, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel, and as you return to your seats after communion today, I invite you to detour through the Angel chapel, and look up at the carvings of these four figures that represent the hosts of heaven.

For those who are not experts on the named angels of God, here briefly is what Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel have meant to God's people through the centuries.

Uriel is named in the second book of Esdras as the one who helps explain a vision. The name itself can be translated as 'God is my light'. In other sources outside the Bible, Uriel is the angel who saves John the Baptist from Herod's Massacre of the Innocents, and the angel that took God's message to Noah before the flood.

In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a source for much of our Western traditions around the archangels, Uriel is described as the, "sharpest sighted spirit in all of heaven."

In icons, this angel is often shown holding flames, or a sun, or a book. Uriel is the patron saint of Confirmation and the keeper of beauty and light.

On to Raphael. This can be translated as 'God has healed' or 'God heals'. In the Old Testament Book of Tobit, Raphael travels in disguise with Tobit's son protecting the man as he travels. Eventually Raphael reveals himself after healing the blind Tobit, which is why this particular archangel is associated with healing.

In icons, Raphael is shown with a staff, signs associated with healing or holding a fish, which is a reference to the healing of Tobit - where fish gall is used in the healing.

Raphael is the patron saint of travellers, the blind, happy meetings, nurses, physicians, medical workers, matchmakers and marriage. The

Jewish text, *The Book of Enoch*, describes Raphael as the angel, “who is set over all the diseases and all the wounds of people.”

Gabriel, a name most familiar to us from the Christmas story, can be translated as ‘Power of God’ or ‘Strong one of God’. Gabriel helps explain the visions of the prophet Daniel. Gabriel is the angel who tells Zechariah about the birth of his son, who will become John the Baptist, and of course Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that God has chosen her to give birth Jesus, the Messiah.

In Jewish tradition, Gabriel is the guardian angel of Israel. Gabriel reveals God’s will, and has been associated with the trumpet blast that will sound before the resurrection of the dead, which you can read about elsewhere in the Book of Revelation. In English literature Gabriel was consolidated with the trumpet blow in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

So, in icons and art, if you see an angel with a trumpet, it is most likely Gabriel, including in our own chapel.

But not all images of Gabriel have a trumpet, especially when shown at the annunciation, telling Mary about the part she is going to play in salvation.

And lastly to Michael, which means ‘Who is like God?’ as a rhetorical question.

Michael fights for the Lord in heavenly and earthly matters. Michael is first mentioned in the Book of Daniel, to quote from chapter 12, “At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise.” Michael contends against the princes of the nations that threaten God’s people.

In the Letter of Jude, there is a reference to, “when the archangel Michael contended with the devil.” Michael is the regular adversary of Satan or the devil.

In the early church and Middle Ages, many legends grew up around Michael, which informs the depiction in *Paradise Lost*. The rich imagery of a battle in heaven has inspired icon writers, artists and sculptors, so Michael is usually shown holding a sword or spear, fighting against the forces of evil, a winged warrior.

Michael is considered the patron saint of grocers, mariners, paratroopers, police officers, and members of the military.

Whether we talk about angels specifically named in the Bible or angels in the broadest sense to include all those who are now in God's presence in eternal rest, the important thing to remember is that our God is a God of communication. God has messengers.

God speaks to us, especially through the Bible, particularly in the teachings of Jesus Christ, but also through angels and through the people in our lives today.

We are loved by a God who desires relationship with us.

God speaks to us and God hears us: when we sing hymns, when we pray together or on our own.

God hears us when we cannot find words.

God does not leave us without direction.

God and the heavenly host may be beyond our human comprehension, but as Christians we can ground that understanding in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And so, in Jesus' name, I pray that Michael and All the Angels will guard you from the forces of evil and strengthen you in God's service.

The Lord be with you.

Elizabeth Murray