

25 September 2011
St Michael's Parish Studio City
Patronal Celebration

What Are Angels?

Today we are celebrating our parish's patron saints, the archangel Michael along with all the angles. So what are we modern, sophisticated, educated Christians to think of angels? They sound kind of primitive, don't they? They're for the naive and superstitious, not for us clearly superior, modern folk. Well, let's think about that for a bit.

When you think of angels, what do you think of? What is your image?

Probably most of us think of cute little boys and girls with wings. Let me be sexist here for a minute: that's a very feminine conception. You know what most men think of those pictures? [gesture] The image of angels as cute babies with wings comes from the Baroque period of art, roughly the seventeenth century. But before that, and after that, and alongside that, are other conceptions of angels.

When I asked you that question, did anyone think of Cary Grant? No, I didn't think so, but Cary Grant was an angel named Dudley in the 1947 movie, *The Bishop's Wife*, where he appeared as, well, Cary Grant, in suit, tie, and topcoat, one of the best-dressed angels on record. He was ably supported by Loretta Young as the bishop's wife and David Niven as the Episcopal Bishop of New York. Here's a synopsis of the movie: "An angel is sent down to mend the ways of a bishop whose absorption with cathedral building has put him out of touch with his wife and parishioners. Whimsical, stolid and protracted light comedy saved by its actors and its old-fashioned Hollywood style." It also exhibits pretty good theology; the director must have had a theologian or two as advisers.

Angels are the science fiction of theology. Science fiction stories, the joy of my adolescence, tell of other life forms than human, on other planets than earth, doing mysterious things, often for incomprehensible purposes. That's a pretty good theological description of angels. Angels are nonhuman creatures of pure spirit, that is they have no bodies, made by God, creatures who are conscious, knowing, and with choice and free will, made in God's image to serve God in their way as human beings serve God in our way. Angels occur in the Bible, in folklore, in literature, in theology, both Christian and nonchristian, and, of course, in new age thought today. The word "angel" comes from the Greek for "messenger," for that is their usual function in scripture. But restricting their meaning to that is like asking your dog what humans are for. The answer, of course, is to feed us, walk us, give us treats, and rub our bellies – what do you mean they have a life of their own?

Angels have many roles and functions in the Bible and in the history of the church. They are messengers, musicians, warriors, and guardians. They are pictured as male and female (always male in the Bible), adults and children. In the Old Testament they are mentioned as God's court, God's companions. They guard the gates to the Garden of Eden. They accompany God when God comes to Abraham on the way to Sodom and Gomorrah. They occur in Moses' vision of the burning bush, Jacob's wrestling with an angel that is a mere cover for God Himself, in the prophet Isaiah's call to prophecy, in the prophet Ezekiel's visions, and more. In the New Testament, they are mentioned at the annunciation to Mary when she consented to be Jesus' mother, at the birth of the Baby in Bethlehem, at Jesus' temptation in the wilderness as He prepares for His work, at His crucifixion, and at His resurrection, as

well as all through the book of Revelation. Mary is a special focus for angels, and one of her titles is Queen of Angels (sound familiar? "Los Angeles" is a shortened way of saying "El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles, The People of Our Lady, Queen of Angels") Angels are sometimes pictured as holding scales and judging souls. Angels are all around us, in space, in time, in the saga of our salvation. And then there is all the rubbish that is written about angels by the new age advocates.

Only three angels are named in the Bible: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael. It is well to bear in mind that all angels [whether good or evil] are under God,... Some angels objected to the creation of the human race, jealous, it is said in Christian folklore, of the glory that would come to humanity through being united to God in Jesus Christ. And so came about fallen angels, or devils: Satan, Beelzebub, and all the others. So powerful is the idea of angels that they have exercised a fascination for Christian and nonchristian alike for millennia. Saint Paul warns against worshiping angels in several of his letters to churches.

Saint Augustine of Hippo wrote: "Every visible thing in this world is put under the charge of an angel."

In the Talmud we read: "There is not a stalk on earth that has not its [protecting or guardian] angel in heaven."

Angels are classified by various writers into categories between seven and twelve in number. A typical listing, that of Pope Gregory the Great in the late sixth century, lists in descending order: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominations, Principalities, Powers, Virtues, Archangels, Angels. A confusion is that Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael are listed sometimes as Archangels, sometimes as Seraphim (the highest order of angels). A typical listing of the seven archangels who stand before God is also that of Pope Gregory the Great: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Simiel, Orifiel, and Zachariel.

Michael is an archangel in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition. He is viewed as the field commander of the Army of God. He is mentioned by name in the Book of Daniel, the Book of Jude, and the Book of Revelation, in which he leads God's armies against the Devil's forces during the Devil's uprising. In the book of Daniel, Michael appears as "one of the chief princes" who in Daniel's vision comes to Gabriel's aid. Michael is also described there as the advocate of the Children of Israel and as a "great prince who stands up for the children of your [Daniel's] people".

We are free to believe in angels or not, depending on our philosophy, theology, or imagination – or lack thereof. For myself, I believe in them as another expression of the incredible fruitfulness and beauty of the creation that mirrors its Creator. I'd be sad if there are no angels in heaven; think what stories they have to tell ! And then I need to apologize to my guardian angel for all the trouble I've cause him/her/whatever. How about you?