

September 27th 2026

Michaelmas

8.00 and 10.30am Holy Communion All Saints Oakham

Compilation of Old and New Testament readings

Readings

Verses from the Old Testament

From Exodus chapter 3. The angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

From Psalm 91. Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling-place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

From Psalm 103. Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word. Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will. Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul.

From Isaiah chapter 6. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

From Daniel chapter 12. 'At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

From Tobit chapter 12. When you and Sarah prayed, it was I who brought and read the record of your prayer before the glory of the Lord, and likewise whenever you buried the dead. And at the same time God sent me to heal you and Sarah. I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who stand ready and enter before the glory of the Lord.'

Verses from the New Testament

From St Luke chapter 1. In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin whose name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'

From St Luke Chapter 3. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

From St John chapter 20. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white. They said to her, 'Woman,

why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’

From Romans chapter 8. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

From Ephesians chapter 6. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly place

From Hebrews chapter 12. But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

From Revelation chapter 1. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, they are the angels of the seven churches.

From Revelation chapter 12. And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated. That ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Gospel – John 1.47-end

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit! Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

One of my early primary school memories is of the exercise books that we used, that had lots of important and improving information on the back cover in very small writing. From such books I learnt my first French word “avoirdupois” and I also learnt how many perches there were in an acre - I always wondered why field area was expressed as a number of fish. And there was a list of the legal and university term dates, just the sort of thing a seven year old Black country child needed to know. And why was a term named after Hilary, and who was she anyway? But it is there that I first came across the word Michaelmas, which sounded very exotic and a bit foreign. It was some years later, at the start of the Michaelmas term at University, that I actually realised what this was all about – the feast of St. Michael and all Angels, the annual celebration of all things angelic. It also

has secular connotations of course – as one of the quarter days, and as the official marking of the autumn equinox. And we celebrate that feast here today - a couple of days early in fact. Our first two readings today were a compilation of a number of readings from scripture that refer to angels, and they show that there were lots of meanings and concepts associated with that word. Medieval scholars constructed complex hierarchies of angels with cherubim, seraphim, archangels and so on, each assigned a rank in the hierarchy, and it all goes a bit complex and silly. But it does seem to me that there are distinct ways in which angels are presented in scripture. In the early parts of the bible, we read of the “angel of the Lord”, the way in which God revealed himself to humanity,

The angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush

Then in both Old and New Testaments, we read of the angels worshipping in the presence of God in heaven. From Isaiah

And one seraph called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’

And from the book of Revelation

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!’

Then there are those angels with a specific task that appear in the nativity and resurrection accounts, to bring God’s message (indeed the word angel means messenger). The Archangel Gabriel is one of these. His words to Mary.

Greetings favoured one, the Lord is with you

Or they might have other specific tasks, such as those guiding the writer of Revelation through his visions, or the Archangel Michael as protector of Israel and adversary of the devil.

At that time, Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise

There are also those that seem to have some sort of protective function for men and women. From Psalm 91

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

And the words of Jesus from Matthew 18

Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.

Guardian angels if you like. Finally the word angel is used in a way that seems to describe the heavenly counterpart of a physical reality – the prophecies of Revelation are addressed to the angels of a number of churches – perhaps something like the “genius” of Rome. We read the voice of the risen Jesus speaking to the author words such as

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write..... ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance.

All very interesting, but what are we to make of all this? How do we interpret these scriptures? Are angels just a metaphor or symbol for the presence of God in some way, with no actual existence, which would be the rational enlightenment view. Or do they have a real existence, albeit a spiritual rather than a physical one, a supernaturalist view. I am VERY firmly of the view that the latter is the case, and indeed is the only way I can make sense of scripture, and indeed of two millennia of church experience. We get in the scriptural visions of angels, in the perceptions of angels throughout human history, a glimpse of a reality beyond our own. And that is one of the most important points we get from a consideration of angels – a different perspective. I talked about this last week when we looked at Paul’s letter to the Philippians, that Pauls had this heavenly perspective on life, even in the midst of his difficulties and trials. In our gospel reading, Jesus tells the ever sceptical Nathaneal, that he will see heaven opened and angels ascending and descending upon the son of Man (a reference to the story of Jacob’s ladder of course) and the way to God’s presence is open for us all. And for us too heaven is also open should we but perceive it – see the Francis Thompson poem in Worship for the Week.

*The angels keep their ancient places
Turn but a stone and start a wing!
’Tis ye, ’tis your estrangèd faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.*

But if we accept the reality of angels, in all their various forms, then a darker truth follows – that as well as the holiness of the angels, there is a spiritual reality of evil. Paul writes to the Ephesians.

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly place.

Here, many interpreters, including myself, believe that Paul isn’t talking about demons or fallen angels (there is a whole other sermon there). But rather in talking about rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers, Paul is talking about those systems that are human creations, but have taken on a real spiritual life of their own. And as with any human creation, they can be both good, bringing great benefits, but can also be evil and hold societies and individuals captive. Such systems can be devilish indeed. We can think for example of the International Economy, that governs the lives of nations. It has its own priestly class in economic advisers, politicians and the press that tells us that economies

have to grow, that the gilt market must not be troubled, that the lives of millions of people have to conform to norms that will ensure that the whole edifice remains undisturbed. Jesus called it Mammon. It has led to great good, in drawing many people out of poverty, but also great evil in oppressing countries and nations.

Another ruler or power is surely the spirit of warfare – call it Mars, Ares, Thor or whatever – the old Gods do not die. Warfare of course flows from the sin of men and women, but spirit of warfare does seem to have a self sustaining life of its own, that not only results in death and injury, but the consumption of huge resources, pollution of land and sea, and the diversion of effort from existential threats such as climate change.

Nation states too seem to have their own spirit, their own angels, and for all the good that is inherent within them, can be the source of division and exclusion when love of nation obscures love of neighbour and can lead to violence towards any who don't belong. Their genius, their angels become corrupted. And the same is true of organisations and even churches, with their own genius or angels. It is disturbing to wonder how the risen Christ of the book of Revelation would address the angel of the Church of England in this day and age.

To the angel of the Church of England write "I know you and have this against you....."

I will let you finish that.

So then, I would suggest that we should recognise the existence of evil in the world, in the institutions that make up our society, and direct our prayers as much against the spiritual forces that sustain this as against those who practice it. And while this *struggle ... against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly place...* might seem overwhelming, is far from hopeless. St. John tells us that

The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the works of the devil.

One interpretation of the events of the passion crucifixion and resurrection was that it marked the defeat of the devil and of evil. Its angelic equivalent

War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated.

So as we celebrate the festival, perhaps we can take two things away. Firstly that the angels do still keep their ancient places; there is a reality beyond the physical where God exists in his holiness, and from which he still sends his angels to guide and protect. And that is both a comfort in our uncertain world, and a cause of joy. And secondly that we should take seriously the existence of evil in the world, in the institutions that make up our society and pray that they might be cleansed and renewed. But also again to rejoice that the devil and all his angels have been defeated by the Archangel Michael and by his Lord and ours, on the cross of Calvary.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen