

Today we observe the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. Thinking back over what I remember of church as a child, there are the powerful memories of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, Advent and Christmas. I can also remember Reformation and All Saints' Day. I have a vague memory of the occasional feast day of one of the apostles or evangelists. But I have no clear memory of this feast. But as I think back over the years of university, seminary, and thereafter, this day in particular has gotten a lot of attention. Not just its observance in chapel or congregation, but awareness of it in conversation and on social media. Back when I was on Facebook it seemed there was an informal competition for who could post the most epic picture of St. Michael defeating Satan.

That this feast seems to have risen to greater prominence among us is a good thing. We need this day because we are directed in a clear, pointed way to something we need to know that has been far too easy to forget. God's Word teaches us concerning the holy angels, and their spiritual opponents, the fallen angels, the demons, who fell from glory by following the Devil. This is useful to us first, and most obviously as we hear the Bible's own description of the holy angels. These correct the tame, popular 90s culture of nice, cute angels, sent to cheer us up, hold our hand, offer a nice cup of tea.

But even more importantly, and why I think this day has come to greater prominence, is that we hear of the reality of the spiritual realm and how pervasive it is. There is no aspect of life in this world that is disconnected from the spiritual battle being waged, no purely natural world that has nothing to do with the supernatural.

The big picture is given in the Second Reading from the Revelation to St. John. The war of rebellion in heaven, the dragon and his angels set against God, cast down out of heaven, no longer able to accuse God's people before Him, because the blood of the Lamb avails for us before the Father. But Satan has been cast down upon earth. He and his angels roam about roaring in this world, seeking whom they may devour in great wrath, for the devil's time is short.

That is what is going on in the world. St. Paul reminds us in Ephesians, **"we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"** (6:12). Our foe is not the person of a different political persuasion, or those nations who reject and attack our way of life. Our enemy as Christian people is never other people. The great opponent we face is not a political ideology, or tragedies in the created world, what troubles us is not the rising and falling of nations, for we recognize that while we indeed must from time to time address these things, behind it all is the raging wrath of the Evil One.

And sent into this world to be God's means of restraint, keeping wickedness at bay, and aiding us in this fight, are the holy angels. We see in Scripture, such as in Daniel chapter 10, that the spiritual forces of good and evil are vested in particular nations, certain angels are given charge over specific empires and nations, working to bring good or ill. We heard in today's Old Testament reading the fiery hosts sent to watch over and guard Israel and the prophet in her midst.

In all the great back and forths of history, within particular countries, we see the battle between God and devil in this world, being waged through men. What drives us especially today, in these recent days and

years, what troubles us, is that the open raging, the seeking of men's destruction not just in this life but in eternity, seems to be advancing. Nearly all of us who follow the news have that running tally of violent and murderous events in our minds. Shootings, stabbings, assassinations, one conflict in the world after another. I have not lived nearly as long as some of you, and yet already I can think back to growing up in the early 90s and I can confidently say of these recent years, "I have never seen anything like this." We can recognize the worldly causes at work. Mental illness going untreated, inflammatory language, exhortations to and acceptability of violence, far too easy availability of firearms. But seeing so much death, such reckless hate, as Christian people, we can identify who is really at work, who is continually seizing the hearts and minds of so many, driving them to do what he has always desired to do, and fill the world with his raging.

And similarly in each of our own lives. Both the holy and the fallen angels are interested in us. This is what our Lord Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel. He holds up a little child as a picture of what it means to be greatest in the kingdom of heaven, one who has his whole existence, lives entirely, by receiving what God gives and does. He ends by warning against despising these little ones. And in between these points, the Lord speaks of receiving such little ones, warns against causing them to sin, bewails the temptations to sin, exhorts us all to recognize what in our lives leads us into temptation and sin, and to take pains to remove it.

This is all speaking of regular life, daily conduct. How we receive and treat one another, how we avoid temptation and sin. And it is all from the perspective of every Christian as the beloved child of the Father in heaven, the object of His gracious love and care, and they are given the holy angels to be with and watch over them. The holy angels stand before God's throne, are always in His presence and service, and yet they also are sent to serve us.

We see throughout the Scriptures how the holy angels are with and active for the sake of God's people. The angel led Lot and his family out of Sodom before its destruction (Gen 19). The angel showed Hagar a spring in the desert to save her and her son Ishmael from dying of thirst (Gen 21). An angel brought food and water to Elijah to sustain him on his journey (1 Kgs 19). We heard of the angelic armies guarding Elisha. The angels of God held the lion's mouths shut so they could not harm Daniel (Dan 6). The angel led Peter out of prison (Acts 12).

They are concerned with our well-being, not just in body but also in soul. Because they love us with perfect, divine love. Their Lord and God bids them to serve and aid us, and they are in perfect accord with that, they happily obey. These holy, mighty beings, the noblest of God's invisible creation, are not ashamed to serve even the little children.

This is why our Lord issues the warnings He does in today's Gospel. For what do you think happens when you spurn the Lord's warning and offer yourself in service to sin because you think no one sees you? The holy angels see and are horrified. The demons are attracted and filled with glee as you turn from serving the God of heaven, and instead, align yourself with their lord. What do you think happens when you look down upon, and despise your brother or sister in Christ, instead of serving them with love, and instead say with Satan's rebellion against God, "I will not serve!" It is bad enough that this is a sin against God, but you also offend and set yourself against the angels of God.

The holy angels and the demons alike see our doings and works. They both have a vested interest in your life because it is lived either in service and imitation of the living and true God, or of the Evil One. And

either one or the other of these invisible hosts are filled with joy by what you do. This truth is a call to Christians to recognize what wars against the Spirit in your flesh, take pains to remove it, to fight it, put it to death. Do not indulge what brings delight to demons. This truth is an encouragement to order our lives according to God's plans and purposes, knowing that we are aided in this battle, cheered on, by the holy angels. They are sent by God to guard and help His people in this war.

But do not think that if you fall, if you have stumbled, that these angels are now and forever your enemy. Jesus calls one and all to turn, have a change of mind, to return and live as a child before God, receive His mercy in Christ Jesus, His salvation and forgiveness, be served and provided for by Him. It is the death of the Son of God for sinners that makes the angels marvel, continually seeking to understand this mystery. And it is when the sinner believes this, repents and confesses his sins and receives God's forgiveness for the sake of His Son, that is what makes the angels in heaven rejoice.