



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Michaelmas (29th September) 2026

The influence of artistic works down the generations has somewhat occluded our understanding of the nature of angelic identity. Depicted as human beings with wings - rather like the Greek god Hermes - we have come to see them as simply runners between the eternal and temporal realms, selected by God from the company of those who stand closest to His celestial throne, to repeat a message in the ear of someone on earth. However, this conception underplays the full glory of the holy angels.

Usual English pronunciation obscures the fact that the name, Michael, ends in the letters -el; it is rather clearer in the cases of Gabriel and Raphael - as also the names of the other angels, whose names come to us through secondary canonical literature. El is the Hebrew word for God; and the names of the angels connote, as it were, extrapolations of the divine being: Michael means, "Who is like God?" Raphael: "God has healed;" and Gabriel: "Power of God."

In other words, through the angels God communicates with us not simply by passing on a message, but by exhibiting something of His Being and activity in the world. They are living symbols of that, towards which, through their activity, they point our attention; and God employs them - has made them - to be an element in His engagement with His creation.

It is the Christian conviction that God is not remote from the events of human history, but constantly calling to us and guiding us through the challenges of life on earth. He lifts the burdens of our suffering, He opens opportunities for us, He inspires us to see through the disappointments and setbacks that come our way to a moment when we shall have overcome them.

Some of this He undertakes through the ministry of the Holy Angels; and the task for us, in the first place, is to discern the activity of the angels in our midst: to identify His power, His healing, His Self-revelation in the world that He has made; and from that to learn something of His Will for human society and the part that we should play within it.

At this point, we draw into our reflexion the emphases in the provisions of the Renewed Covenant revealed in the Incarnate Ministry of Jesus Christ. Herein the foci of faithfulness and God's work in the world are love, mercy and forgiveness: these are the primary imperatives emerging from His Sacrifice.

As with the angels, we are called to do more than simply talk about them. By the character of our lives and our responses to events around us, it falls to us to embody these qualities - to be living symbols of them so that through us, others might encounter something of God at work in the world through His love, His mercy and His forgiveness.

Yet, we do not do this in our own power. As we shall reiterate in a few minutes, the angels find their home in Heaven, before the Throne of God, offering Him their worship: it is thence that God sends them out as His messengers. Likewise, we most effectively convey that message of love, mercy and forgiveness, when we bring it, hotfoot, so to speak, from that assembly where we gather with angels, archangels and the whole company of Heaven. In other words, our witness to the divine Will and Purpose for humanity must be rooted in the worship that we offer.

As well as the particular tasks for which the angels are chosen, the nature of their very existence points us towards the model of what it is to be faithful to God.