



Patronal Festival

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 3 October 2021

READINGS

Genesis 28:10-17; Psalm 103:19-22; Revelation 12:7-12; John 1:47-51

Feast of St Michael and All Angels

Last week Friday, at the end of our Provincial Synod on Heritage Day, we joined in the virtual service of the inauguration of a new Anglican Province in Africa: the Anglican Church of Mozambique and Angola, birthed from the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. This historic moment brought into sharp focus the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing growth and dynamism in the Anglican Church in Africa. It was only a year ago that another Church was formed in North Africa, the Episcopal/Anglican province of Alexandria. Participating in the inaugural service gave one a sense of real connection with the Anglican Communion in a tangible way as the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Revd Justin Welby, presided and preached. Why all this information, you may ask? What has it got to do with celebrating the Patronal festival of a church in Bryanston?

A Patronal Feast is the occasion on which a parish annually honours the saint who was chosen as the Patron Saint of that parish. Today, this parish celebrates a feast to honour the Archangel Michael and All the Saints, quite simply because 68 years ago the name "Archangel Michael" was chosen at the establishment of this parish to be its Patron Saint. The formation of a new church bears testimony to the Spirit of God at work in the life of a community of faith.

So today, in the presence of the Holy Spirit and all the Saints in the heavenly realm, we join together with our online community, with joyful hearts and sincere gladness, in celebrating our sixty-eighth Patronal Festival. On this day, we give thanks for the many ways in which God's loving care watches over us, both directly and indirectly, and we are reminded that the richness and variety of God's creation far exceeds what we know of it.

My earlier allusion to the establishment of two Anglican Provinces in North Africa and Southern Africa was meant to help us realise that we are a church that is part of a Communion of Anglicans across the globe. We are charged with the same marks of the church that every Anglican worldwide is characterized by:

1. Proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom (as Evangelists)
2. Teaching, baptizing and nurturing new believers (as Teachers of the faith)
3. Responding to human needs by loving Service (in our Pastoral outreach)
4. Transforming unjust structures of society, challenging violence of every kind and pursuing peace and reconciliation (having Prophetic relevance)

5. Striving to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustaining and renewing the life of the Earth (as Apostles).

In our own way, here at St Michael's, we have endeavoured to live out these ideals and more.

As we look closely at our readings for today, we discover a little more about spiritual beings who dwell with God, worshipping before the throne of God; obedient messengers of God who speak only what God instructs. The word 'angel' means 'messenger'; and therefore, angels are seen as messengers from God, sent forth to do God's will.

In our first reading we hear a story of Abraham's grandson, Isaac's son, Esau's twin brother, Jacob. Today's piece of the story takes place when Jacob is running for his life after having deceived his brother and stolen that which was not intended for him to have. Travelling up through the hills, Jacob stops for the night. Lonely and homeless, he lies down with his head on a stone. As he sleeps, he dreams. He sees a stairway, reaching all the way from earth to heaven - with angels (spiritual beings) coming and going. And somehow through these angels, God speaks to him, telling him that he, Jacob, will be fruitful and multiply and through this a community of peoples will come into being. And God promises that he will be with Jacob every step of the way.

You and I would wonder how this manipulative, conniving and underhanded man, Jacob could be visited by angels? The angels, delivering God's message, help Jacob see past his current loneliness and discomfort in order to catch a glimpse of God's bigger plan for him and for his descendants.

This image of angels going up and down is repeated in our Gospel reading, because it is this passage that Jesus seems to be referring to when he says to Nathanael that he and the other disciples will see heaven opened, with the angels of God going up and down. The point here, perhaps, is that through the appearance of those angels, God was there with Jacob, in that place. Jacob called that place 'Bethel'; that is, 'God's house'. And, furthermore, later - when Jacob returned to that place and when, centuries later, his descendants had been established there, Bethel became one of the great sanctuaries of Israel, one of the primary places where early Israelite worship was carried on. The tradition of Jacob's dream, of the angels going up and down on the ladder, would then be connected with the belief that when you worshipped God in that place - that house - God was really present, with his angels coming and going.

And as we read and reflect on this passage from John, this is probably exactly the clue we're looking for. When John says that the Word became flesh 'and lived among us', the word for 'lived' is a word associated which can be understood as 'God pitching a tent' in our midst. When we are with Christ, it is as though we are in the house of God, the Temple itself, with God's angels coming and going, and God's own presence there beside us. Jesus came to overcome the evil of this world, and to this day and throughout eternity, He is with us, and St. Michael and all Angels are serving as faithful messengers on God's behalf - protecting us, leading us, guiding us into the way of truth and light.

What is the value to us in remembering the Holy Angels? They are the ones who fight the unseen battles and wars. They reveal God's presence and announce God's glory in a world where peace and truth and hope are not fully realised. You only need to turn on the TV and read the news to see images of war and continuous displacement of people because of political instability and it seems that we are constantly at war with someone. Therefore, we celebrate Michael and the angels for their constant vigilance in the spiritual realm protecting us against those enemies we cannot see and for assisting us in those times of

trouble. They are the messengers of God and they play a very active, though unseen, role in our lives. When we look at the meaning of the names of the archangels (Michael, Gabriel & Raphael), we glean something about God and about humanity's relationship with God:

Michael means 'Who is like God?' And the immediate answer, of course, is no one. Only Jesus is. And because Jesus is, I am, and you are, and so is every human being made in the divine image. And that includes the poor, the neglected, those on the margins of society.

Gabriel is famous for announcing the good news of salvation. Gabriel means 'God is my strength'. Gabriel reminds us that we're not in this on our own; that when we feel bewildered and helpless about the world's problems, and entirely helpless about our own capacity to meet them, God is our strength, too.

Raphael means 'God is my healer', and he reminds us that our vocation is to be agents of God's healing and reconciliation in the world. There is so much brokenness in the world, in our families, in our communities and in our churches.

Our calling as a church, is to celebrate when we glimpse God at work in our communities. To declare the truth of God in our world when justice is needed. Our calling is to be God's ambassadors of reconciliation where there is conflict. To quote one of the most prolific theologian, C.S. Lewis:

"The Church exists for nothing else but to draw people into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became human for no other purpose."

As our worship ends on this Sunday, may our service begin as we go out into the world to live and work to God's praise and glory and to share with the world that we share in the divinity of God, that God is our strength and that God is the ultimate healer.