

## SERMON FOR THE OCTAVE OF MICHAELMAS 2025

About 7 in 10 U.S. adults believe in angels, according to a recent poll, which shows that belief in angels is more common than belief in the devil or hell. This belief spans across various religious affiliations, with 94% of evangelical Protestants but interestingly enough only 82% of Catholics affirming their faith in angels.

So that means Approximately 69% of U.S. adults believe in angels. Now that is quite striking in a so-called secular age. Of course, the U.S. culture might be termed more spiritual than say Western Europe or New Zealand for that matter. But it is still extremely fascinating. It points to the fact that though many may not hold to the formal doctrines of Christianity, many around us have a belief in the supernatural. They are not materialists. In fact, materialists seem to be in the minority. There is all around us a hunger and a desire for the numinous, expressing that deep longing within us that there is more to life than what we see.

In this octave of Michaelmas, we have been drawing our focus towards that unseen realm. There has in fact been two days dedicated to Angels this week. Of course, we celebrated the Feast of St Michael and All Angels on Monday night. But on Thursday we also had the memorial for the Holy Guardian Angels. Interestingly enough the Church has never formally declared that every individual has a protecting angel. However, a writer as far back as St Jerome said it was the “mind of the Church”. He wrote in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew:

*How great the dignity of the soul, since each one has from birth an angel commissioned to guard it.*

Belief in guardian angels was common among many cultures in ancient times. Examples can be given from many ancient writers including that great Greek historian Plutarch as well as from the Babylonians and Assyrians. In fact, many believe it was their belief which was taken up by the Jews following their periods of conquest and exile.

In the Old Testament, the evidence of protecting angels is frequent. For example, an angel led Lot to safety before the destruction of Sodom. During the Exodus, an angel is appointed as leader of the Israelites. As well, God tells Moses in Exodus chapter 23:

*I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. (Exodus 23:20)*

There is also the lovely story of the angel (Raphael) who took protective care of Tobias as he went in search of a bride and for medicine to heal his blind father in the apocryphal book of Tobit. (Tobit chap 5).

In Psalm 91:11 we read:

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

If these verses sound familiar, it is because Satan quoted them as part of Jesus' second temptation in the wilderness. Satan said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will put his angels in charge of you.' and, 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you don't dash your foot against a stone'" (Matthew 4:6). Jesus countered, "Again, it is written, 'You shall not test the Lord, your God.'"

But the psalmist wrote these verses to reassure the faithful that Yahweh will send his angels to guard them—to bear them up—to protect them from dangers large and small.

So how does this idea of the guardian angels relate to our present reality? It is easy perhaps to dismiss such a notion as the guardian angels as a form of baseless speculation. But I think it speaks to our deepest longings for protection, guidance and most importantly the hope we share in the Gospel. That is why perhaps, despite declining religious affiliation so many people still believe in things such as angels.

In his 2014 homily for the Feast of Holy Guardian Angels, Pope Francis told those gathered for daily Mass to be like children who pay attention to their "traveling companion". No one journeys alone and no one should think that they are alone, the Pope said. This echoes Thomas Aquinas, who once wrote 'this road man is threatened by many dangers both from within and without, and therefore as guardians are appointed for men who have to pass by an unsafe road, so an angel is assigned to each man as long as he is a wayfarer.

I think we can acknowledge that we are all on a journey towards God, towards holiness, towards theosis, union with the Holy Trinity. And we know this is often a difficult road, filled with disappointments and struggles. You may be in that space at this very moment, feeling alone and despondent. If anything, the idea of Angels gives us a glimpse into the heart of the God we worship. He is not uninterested, he is not distant, but if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear we would realise that God is closer than we think, closer than our very breath, and perhaps a guardian angel too. One thing is certain however, no matter what happens, Jesus's promise is to be with us always, even to the end of the age.

As Lancelot Andrewes, that great priest of the Anglican Church, when speaking on our Gospel reading today put it:

"The manner of it is, That Mary Magdalene staying still by the sepulchre, first she saw a vision of Angels; and after, she saw Christ Himself. Saw Him, and was herself made an Angel by Him, a good Angel to carry the Evangel, the first good and joyful tidings of His rising again from the dead.

And this was a great honour, all considered, to serve in an Angel's place. To do that at His resurrection, His second birth, that at His first birth an Angel did. An Angel first published that, Mary Magdalene brought first notice of this. As he to the shepherds, so she to the Apostles, the Pastors of Christ's flock, by them to be spread abroad to the ends of the world."

Today we give thanks for all the company of heaven, Angels and Archangels, those messengers and guardians who do his will, who like Mary Magdalene, comfort us in our despair and point us towards the risen Christ, our living hope.