Sermon for Michael and All Angels

Today we celebrate the Feast of Michael and All Angels. Given their prominence today, it's worth considering what an angel is, and what they might mean. There is a whole area of scholarship about angels and their various types, which includes cherubim, seraphim, thrones, powers, principalities, and archangels, to name but a few.

I'm sure that you have an image in your mind about what an angel might look like (and I would wager that wings will feature in the description), or maybe you doubt their existence or presence in this world. I am aware of more than a few people who deeply believe in God, but wonder about the existence of angels, whether they are present in this world, and how they relate to us.

And when you read your Bible, some of the descriptions of angels are certainly strange. The image of an ethereal being with wings is quickly challenged with some odd imagery indeed … beings covered in eyes, intersecting wheels of fire … all of these are in our Scripture as depictions of angelic beings.

But what is an angel? What makes an angel an angel? When we look at the word itself, it comes from the Greek, *angelos*, meaning 'Messenger'. So one of the best ways for us to think about angels is as divine messengers; those with something to communicate to us that is for our benefit. It is up to us to use the encounter to the fullest.

Angels are Godly in that they are present when we need them, saying what is needed, whether it is comforting or challenging, and reminding us of some important things. There is a sense of the divine in their timing, and also that their presence might be fleeting, rather than something which is consistent.

As messengers, think of Gabriel speaking with Mary, announcing that she would become the God-bearer, and bring Jesus, God incarnate, into the world. He carries a monumentally important message, and he begins with words of greetings, encouragement and reassurance. Many times in scripture we hear an angel say "do not be afraid", as a way to reassure people who would be both surprised and possibly frightened by the encounter.

But then we have the reading from the Book of Revelation, which paints a different image of angels. It features Michael. And it speaks of the angels going to war against "the dragon and his angels", which could be interpreted as demonic forces.

What might we make of this? As usual, I would caution against a literal reading, but ask whether a metaphorical one might provide us with something useful to work with.

Firstly, it demonstrates that angels are brave. They are willing to stand up when it matters. While the image of winged beings speaking words of peace and reassurance might hint at gentility and softness, there is a determination that should not be overlooked. Messengers know that they need to do what they need to do, and to deliver their messages with determination.

While not part of the passage from Revelation, angels are also depicted as being wise. This reflects to their ability to say what is needed at the right time, and to communicate well. From this we are reminded to use our intellect and the gifts that God has given us.

Then we should turn to St Raphael, an Archangel, who is among the wider multitude of angels referred to in this feast day.

Raphael doesn't make many appearances in Scripture, but is mostly found in the Book of Tobit and the Gospel according to John. Raphael journeyed with Tobias, and healed Tobit's injured eyes. For this, Raphael is considered a protector and healer, and is the patron of travellers, the blind, happy meetings, nurses, physicians, medical workers, matchmakers, Christian marriage, and Catholic studies.

There is something rather wonderful in his being depicted as a traveller, someone who walks beside us as we journey, just as he walked with Tobias and spoke with him along the way. It makes our Church of St Raphael's a place where people meet together, to worship together, and to continue their journey of faith in good company, and with mutual support. With this as a symbol of our Patron, I think we are particularly blessed.

So as we celebrate the feast of Michael and All Angels, may we be open to the presence of angels around us, in many and varied forms. Let us be open to the fact that we all might, from time to time, be an angelic messenger to others, being there at the right time, saying the thing that was needed to be said, and being a presence who was helpful in a moment when it was needed. And when we need to, remember that we have the ability to stand up when it counts, for yourself and for others. Remember that we have the ability to unfurl our wings …

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All Saints, South Hobart and St Raphael's, Fern Tree
The Feast of St Michael and All Angels; 27 September 2026