



THE SERMON AT THE HIGH MASS

Preached by Fr William Davage

There were angels dining at the Ritz.

SOME TIME AGO, I was asked by an intense Nonconformist Chaplain to sum up Anglo-Catholicism. 'Oh,' I said airily, 'angels dining at the Ritz.' What I had forgotten was that with intensity and Nonconformity sometimes goes an under-developed sense of humour. I had to justify it. With that superficiality with which Oxford equips you, I said that it combined the divine and the worldly: the divine sanctifying the world. It was the incarnational principle. It encompassed the beauty of holiness. It spoke of manna from heaven, the food of angels. It suggested that all would be invited to the banquet both in time and beyond time. I had almost convinced myself. But, more to the point, I had convinced her. As the young might say: result. The angels dining at the Ritz, of course, were those estimable individuals who invested in theatrical productions and either hit the jackpot or took consolation for their financial losses with, perhaps, artistic success. Our angels this morning are different.

We recognise within ourselves two sides to our characters, dark and light, bad and good, cruel and kind, optimistic and pessimistic, hopeful and cynical, a capacity for virtue and a propensity to vice. It may be tempting to say that our human nature comprises the diabolic and the angelic. Angels, however, are something different. Angels rejoice in the kingdom of heaven over one sinner who repents not because they see one of their own redeemed but because their being is to celebrate and worship, to serve God's purpose, to give thanks when that purpose is achieved in other beings.

In the Creed in the words '*visibilium omnium et invisibilium*,' 'visible and invisible,' 'seen and unseen,' we acknowledge the existence of a created realm beyond temporal and physical constraints. We might call it heaven; we might see it as a realm of glory from which the angels come to break into our world with shafts of light from a place other than ours. The light of God breaks into the darkness of our lives and of our world, but somewhere above 'the light shines in light and fills a world of light.'² There in the fullness of his power, God has created unspoilt beings worthy of him who makes them. They, like God, are light and in them is no darkness at all. They are the holy angels.

Our belief in angels comes from the words of Jesus, from the record of Scripture, from the testimony of the saints and from the teaching of the

Church. We may, if we are foolish, dismiss angels as figments of the imagination, childish fantasies, on a par with J. M. Barrie's Tinkerbell. If we see ourselves as the highest in creation, through that self-centredness we will lose sight of the angels.

As society loses confidence in mechanistic and psychological explanations for human nature and worldly phenomena, the more we come to recognise the reality and power of the spiritual world. The puzzle becomes not why God created angels but why he ever created anything else.

Angels are pure spirit, created by God before human beings. They are the first reflection of God's own nature. They never die. They have forms of knowledge, love, praise and power beyond ordinary humans. As spiritual creatures, they have intelligence and will, personal and immortal, and they surpass in their perfection all creatures: 'the sons of this age ... cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.'³ Angels serve God as the agents of his goodwill to men. They are Christ's angels, 'when the Son of Man comes in glory and all the angels with him.'⁴ They serve human salvation. Although angels are higher than humans by nature, pure spirits, nevertheless, they serve human beings. They serve us because we are higher than them by grace. Not by creation but by grace we are children of God, 'very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people'⁵ and are, thereby, through no merit of our own elevated above the angels. S^t Augustine tells us that 'angel is the name of their office, not of their nature. If you seek the name of their nature it is spirit; if you see the name of their office, it is angel: from what they are, spirit, from what they do, angel.'⁶

As agents of God, Scripture abounds with records of their actions and appearances in God's saving work towards humankind. As messengers of God's purpose, angels act as agents of revelation and prophesy, as protectors and guardians, as attendants upon Christ, as agents of judgement, as watchers over the dying, engaged in ceaseless worship.

In the Old Testament, angels are present from creation and active throughout the history of the old covenant, serving the accomplishment of God's divine plan. They close the earthly paradise:⁷ they saved Hagar and Ishmael after Abraham had cast them out. The disciples of Elisha saw the regiments of angels standing by to rescue their master. They stayed Abraham's hand as he prepared to slay Isaac.⁸

In the New Testament, they were messengers of his salvation. They heralded the Incarnation. 'The Angel of the Lord brought tidings to Mary.' They rejoiced in song at Our Lord's Nativity. '*Gloria in excelsis Deo.*' They protected Jesus in his infancy. They ministered to him in the wilderness. They were with him in the Garden. Jesus would not suffer the angels to rescue him.⁹ The women went to the sepulchre on the third day, and we often say that the

first witnesses to the Resurrection were women, but the first witnesses to the Resurrection were neither women nor men, but angels. The angels rolled back the stone to reveal the empty tomb. An angel announced the fact of the Resurrection, 'He is not here, for he is risen as he promised.'¹⁰ It was by dying that Jesus opened for ever a door between heaven and earth through which we may pass. His sepulchre is a piece of heaven, a place of angels.¹¹

The ministry of angels continued in the early Church. The ministry of angels continues in the Church. Daily we join our voices 'with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven.'¹² Our worship daily or weekly augments their voices. Their ministry of protection continues. We invoke them to guard us through the silent watches of the night. The ministry of angels is especially significant to the dying. In the *Proficicere*, we commend their souls to God through the saints, through the ranks of angels, thrones, dominations, principedoms, powers, prophets, evangelists. And at the last, we pray the angels to carry the soul to heaven. Horatio's words over the dead Hamlet, 'flights of angels sing thee to thy rest'¹³ are but the ancient prayer of the Church in her liturgy for the dead: '*In Paradisum deducant te angeli*' ... 'May the angels receive thee in Paradise ... and bring thee to the holy city of Jerusalem.' Until that day when we see the heavenly liturgy, not as men see it but as it is seen in heaven, we catch a glimpse of it here. 'The air is thick with [angels'] wings, wherever a Christian priest, by Christ's command brings back upon the altar the sacrifice of Christ.'¹⁴ For a moment time and eternity meet. The spiritual and the physical worlds fuse and we catch sight of S^t John's vision. Through clouds of incense, we see the throne of glory, the living creatures, the elders, the cherubim and seraphim, the sacrifice of the Lamb, a lamb without blemish. We see the choir of angels and hear their voices around the throne, 'myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands,' ten thousand times ten thousand, saying with one voice: 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.'¹⁵



ENDNOTES

¹ Nicene Creed

² Austin Farrer, *The End of Man*, p. 31

³ *S^t Luke 20.36*

⁴ *S^t Matthew 25.31*

⁵ *Book of Common Prayer*

⁶ *S^t Augustine, Errationes in Psalmos 103, 1, 15*

⁷ 'He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.' *Genesis 3.24*

⁸ 'The angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said 'do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him: for now I know that you fear God.' *Genesis 22.11-12*

⁹ 'Do you not think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?' *S^t Matthew 26.53*

¹⁰ *S^t Matthew 28.6*

¹¹ Austin Farrer, *The End of Man*, p. 33. 'Where Jesus lies sanctified for us, heaven is opened, a great shaft of light falls from above and the angels of God are seen ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

¹² *Book of Common Prayer*

¹³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, v.ii.373

¹⁴ Austin Farrer, *The End of Man*, p. 34

¹⁵ *Apocalypse 5.11-12*