

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Evensong
The Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels
September 29, 2019

+

A few minutes ago we heard a vivid and memorable account of a dramatic incident which occurred perhaps three thousand years ago. The description is taken from The Second Book of the Kings. And what makes it vivid and memorable is the way it places supreme confidence standing side by side with abject despair.

The predicament is this. The Syrian army has surrounded the city of Dothan. There was no earthly possibility of escaping complete destruction. Of the two men surveying the desperate situation one is a servant. And he cried out, "Alas! Master, how shall we do?" But from the other, who is the great prophet Elisha, there was no trembling response. "Fear not", he says, "For they that be with us are more than they that be with them." And then the prophet prayed the eyes of his servant be opened. They *were* opened, and Holy Scripture tells us what he saw: "the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire." Surrounding Elisha and his servant, and shielding Dothan from possible harm, was arrayed in close formation the ranks of Holy Angels. That is the account.

Many people who otherwise accept Divine Revelation dismiss the deliverance at Dothan as a quaint piece of pre-scientific folk history. But it is impossible to delete angels without tearing the heart out of the Holy Scriptures. *Angels are there!* They are at the beginning, with the cherubim at the Gate of Eden. They are at the end, with the angel who tells Saint John not to seal up the Revelation. The angelic host is revealed momentarily at Bethlehem, singing the triumphant anthem of welcome to the New Born King. Angels accompany the King in His Passion. Careful readers of the scriptures notice Our Lord Jesus, in His teaching, never attempts to *prove* the existence of angels. He takes their existence for granted as a matter of course. *Angels are a given*, not a question, for the Son of God. In the Biblical revelation angels are acknowledged as part of supernatural experience. And the supernatural is not Hollywood smoke and mirrors! It is the higher natural part of God's creation. This is the belief of the Church and you and I give assent to that belief.

But if the belief is to be of any real value it must have a vital bearing on our character and conduct. We need to understand and expect angels are also *ordinary* in our world as well. Angels are not a holdover explanation from Biblical times.

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Evensong
The Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels
September 29, 2019

+

Almighty God continues to reveal His will for us, and to us, by way of His messengers. In this regard, the secular world gives feeble support. In the past few decades angels are “in.” They have become increasingly prominent on Christmas cards where they are “safe” because they can look pretty without announcing their message. Angels are the subjects of lectures in great art museums. In one summer resort town on the shore of Lake Michigan there used to be a small shop dedicated totally to the subject of angels. Such stores, wherever they are, usually get angels wrong.

Saint Gregory the Great reminded us the word “angel” denotes a *function* rather than a nature. By nature these holy spirits dwell in Heaven. All that was seen by human eyes at Dothan was horses and chariots of fire. But these holy spirits are angels when they deliver a message. **Angelos** means *messenger*. Secular modern people most often want spirits, not angels. Hence those Christmas cards where the angels play lutes and harps and do not announce the birth of the Prince of Peace. People want spirits, not angels, because angels bring God’s message, and many people do not want to hear God’s message and its claim upon them.

At Dothan Elisha’s servant was in fear. So the prophet prayed his eyes might be opened. Notice that when they were opened, the servant saw *what was already there before his eyes were opened*. The angelic army was already protecting the righteous and offering a way out of difficulty. On Saint Michael’s Day we observe the anniversary of the day the protection and guidance of the Holy See was conferred upon our gifts of Anglican expression here in the Boston area. It was Pope St John Paul II who made that happen. Today marks the twenty-second anniversary of that happy day. There is a word from the Lord for us. People are asking their own version of “Alas, how shall we do?” And we can answer as Elisha did, with a word of comfort and encouragement. “Fear not.” And you remember Pope John Paul used that phrase at the outset of his pontificate. Repeatedly he said “Do not be afraid.” But notice the prophet did something else. He prayed that his servant’s eyes might be opened ... opened to see what was there all the time. And the Holy Father did the same. He said “Open wide the doors for Christ.” And what

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Evensong
The Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels
September 29, 2019

+

was there all the time is Jesus Christ and His Church, which is surrounded by Holy Angels, and shepherded by Peter, as provided by Our Lord.

How wonderful it would be one day for some separated and wandering soul to say to you “*You’re an angel*” and mean it in the Biblical way. For an angel bears a welcoming message of salvation, and brings the consoling embrace of Christ and His Church.