

*26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2022*

*OT: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15*

*Epistle: 1 Timothy 6:6-19*

*Gospel: Luke 16:19-31*

Today's Gospel reading contains that well known story about the poor man Lazarus, who sat at the gate of the rich man, who traditionally is given the name Dives, hoping for some food or money. We are told, in a very stark picture in the Biblical text, that "even the dogs would come and lick his sores."

The story continues with our being told, in verse 22, "The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham." It is such a simple reference to the angels that we can more often than not take no notice of it. In my preparation for today a couple of bells started to ring, or perhaps that should be toll, when I heard King Charles end his first speech as our King. He quoted from Shakespeare's Hamlet when he said, in reference to his late mother, "May 'flights of Angels sing thee to thy rest."

What does early twenty-first century society exclude from conversation? Certainly not sex; at least in the more "sophisticated" circles accounts of sexual exploits scarcely raise an eyebrow. If you really want to bring all talk to a halt in shocked embarrassment, every eye riveted on you, try mentioning angels, or demons, or the devil. You will be watched for signs of stress and nervous break-down and then quietly shunned.

Why is it that even those Christians who have encountered angels — and I have known a number — hesitate to relate their stories? Part of the answer, it seems to me, lies in the fact that angels are marginal figures. They never appear centre stage: at the risk of an awful pun, they are always in the wings!

Today as we gather for Eucharist, to give thanks to our God, let us focus our attention for a short time on the angels. It is, after all, the remembrance in our Liturgical Calendar of St Michael and All Angels on Thursday the 29<sup>th</sup>.

Week by week in the liturgy we say, "Therefore with the faithful who rest in him, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name," Notice that the angels and the company of heaven are two distinct entities. I remember well, as the Head of Department Religious Education at a girls' college in Auckland, having to take to task a very well-meaning and faithful teacher

who was teaching her Religious Education class that when we die we become angels. That is utter rubbish; yet this teacher felt it was rather a nice symbol for the younger girls to think about if they had lost someone special. When we die our souls are commended to God. Angels are entirely different entities and are usually the messengers of God. They have a clear work to do in obedience to God's command.

If we look at scripture, we find that angels are found in the margins of the Bible story. We might remember that Jacob saw the angelic border guard going up and down a ladder. Likewise, Joshua was surprised on entering the Land of God's promise to run into the captain of the Lord's host. Angels often get salvation history going, as when they visited Abraham and Sarah at Mamre; sometimes they also close the book on someone, as when the fiery chariots with angels swept Elijah away.

If we look at the life of Jesus, we can see that the presence of angels seem to be the bookends of his life and death; there is the host of Christmas angels praising God at his birth: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests"; and there are the angels at the empty tomb at the first Easter. In Matthew the angel of the Lord came down and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothes were white as snow. In Luke we find two angels, who asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

Angels are marginal. For many modern Christians, this very marginality is a reason for neglecting them — either by explaining them away with sophistication and secular rationalizations, or by sterilizing them into cute little cherubs to be found only on Valentine's Day cards, or even in an advert on TV for soft toilet paper! More often than not we simply ignore them.

But the truth of our religion is that God is a god of love; and often he communicates this love through the ministry of an angel. The angels do the bidding of the Lord. Their usually unseen presence is felt in so many ways in our lives. I would venture to say that life without the angelic dimension may become barren even for the Christian.

Without the angels and the way in which they touch our lives the idea of God could become one that is distant, it would feel as if God were absent from our lives. It is the angels who make God immanent — a word which means close and intimate — in our lives. Jesus becomes more than a symbol; he becomes part of our lives in an ever-deepening relationship.

But if the angels are in the wings, we know that the very darkness of our world is a sign of the victory of God's heavenly kingdom. We know that in the heavenly war the ancient Dragon has been cast down to earth because his time is short. We know that Michael and his legions have won the battle. And despite our uncertainty and doubts, our falls from grace and our repeated sin we know that God's heavenly kingdom is our inheritance and our homeland, and that we are, as S Peter teaches us, aliens and strangers while we are here on earth.

While we live here on earth we can experience the work of the angels; we might not recognise what is happening, but every now and then, if we listen extra carefully, we will hear the flutter of the angels' wings.

The angels fly to and fro across the face of the earth doing the will of God. We know that the angels of God rejoice over one sinner who repents; that they hand-deliver the soul of every poor Lazarus into the bosom of Abraham; that they swing their chariots low for every needy slave and saint as they carry them home; that they watch over, with grief and love, every aborted "product of conception" for whom Christ died; that they surround those who are ruining their lives through drug and alcohol abuse; that they protect us while we sleep, and guide us while we are awake so that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep may rest in peace.

If angels are in the wings, they will indeed listen to the great command of the Son of Man and draw the curtains on this age when its time is come. The tedious and repetitious tragedy and comedy which we call history will come to an end. The Ancient of Days will watch as thrones of judgment are set up and will see the angels usher those who allied themselves with Satan into outer darkness. The Ancient of Days will also watch as the steadfast, those who remained faithful in their confession that Jesus is God and Lord, are invited by the angels to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Today we are invited not just to play-act in this weekly ritual; but genuinely to come to the Supper, to approach the altar of the Lord, to receive the life-giving Body and Blood, and to enter into this great chorus of salvation:

"Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like the loud peals of thunder, shouting,

Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.  
Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory,

for the wedding of the Lamb has come,  
and his Bride has made herself ready . . . ".

May God bless you and give you a glimpse of the angels as they tarry round you and yours. May you be granted grace to hear the wings of the angels as they minister to you, bringing you everyday evidences of the love God in Jesus Christ our Lord.