

The counsellor looked up with a start; he hadn't heard this new client enter. Indeed, he hadn't been expecting anyone right then: he thought he had a free period in his schedule. But as he glanced at his computer, up popped the alert – an appointment for a new client, Mike.

“Have a seat, Mike”, Alex invited, his sweeping gesture taking in the selection of chairs of various styles and forms of comfort. Mike sat himself down on an upright office chair with no arms, sitting quite straight and stiffly. *Sitting at attention*, thought Alex. A military man, perhaps? There was certainly a sternness in his bearing and visage. And yet, at the same time, there was a strange kind of ... *translucency?* about his features.

“What brings you here today?” began Alex.

“I'm just not understood,” whined Mike.

“I see. Tell me about that: how does ‘not understood’ show up for you?” encouraged Alex.

“Well, when I have some down-time between campaigns and when I'm off regular duty ...” began Mike.

“So you're in the military? The Army perhaps?” ventured Alex.

“Yes, I'm in the Army.”

*Maybe we're looking at some PTSD as well*, thought Alex. *So common in these army folks returned from active duty*. But he kept this train of thought to himself for the time-being, made a shorthand note on his pad, and instead asked, “Sorry, do go on: tell me about being not understood?”

“As I was saying, when I have some time between campaigns or off-duty, I hear what people think of me, what people are saying about me... well, what they're saying

about *all of us*, really. I say ‘me’ because it feels so personal. People just seem to have no respect for us, for what we do, for the role we play.”

Alex pursed his lips. “Are you sure that is so? The reports I see in the media surely leave people in no doubt about the significant and dangerous role you all play. Where have you served?”

“Everywhere,” replied Mike. Alex made a note with a question mark, as Mike went on. “You mention the media. And that’s a classic example where we are misrepresented; not just in the news, but in story and song and film.”

“Well, I’m no military man, so I guess I’m not really one to judge,” responded Alex, thoughtfully, “but I thought *Band of Brothers* for example gave a pretty realistic portrayal. Tell me how you see it, though.”

“There has been a shift, a degeneration, down the years. Fra Angelico, for example, did quite well in portraying us carrying in both face and gesture the peace and authority of heaven. But less than a hundred years later, we have Raphael presenting us as chubby and infantile. And then in the nineteenth century of our Lord we come to soft, slim, girlish images, always providing nothing more than mere consolation.”<sup>1</sup> The contempt in Mike’s voice had become palpable, and there had been a kind of incandescent flaring in that strangely luminous face.

Alex had been scribbling furiously as Mike spoke. He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, I’m no scholar of the visual arts, and I’m not sure I’ve come across those particular images. But I think I can appreciate how offensive they might be. Perhaps it might be good to tell me how you would like you and your comrades to be portrayed.”

“It is less about the particular form,” began Mike. “The form we take with people is simply a convenience for the sake of undertaking the particular task assigned. The issue is more about what the image conveys; the images are symptomatic of the real issue. The issue is that there has been a taming, a domestication, of us in people’s

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<sup>1</sup> Drawn from the Preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, by C S Lewis, cited in Brown, “Mighty ones”

understanding. It means that the messages we bring are these days largely ignored; it means that people fail to join us in the noble duty of offering praise at the throne; it means that people choose to keep themselves totally unaware of the battles in which we are engaged for their protection and benefit, choosing not to get involved in the way they should – or on the other hand that people get themselves too interested in the real, but limited and ultimately futile, victories of the other side.”

Now the counsellor was struggling. While the last part sounded a bit soldierly, the whole answer didn't ring true to what Alex understood of military life and work. *Man, I'll have some work to do in supervision next week*, he thought. He made a conscious effort of will to bring his focus back on the client in front of him. How to care for him? Was he dealing with delusion? He decided he should confront the disconnect head-on. He drew a deep breath: “Forgive me, but I'm a little confused. Your description of the issue isn't in terms I'd normally associate with being a soldier. Can you help me understand?”

“I'm not a soldier; not in that way,” replied Mike.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I had assumed. Being in the Army, as you said. And something about your bearing, I guess.”

“No, not a soldier. An angel,” said Mike, matter-of-factly.

“An angel? Is that one of those new civilian roles? Like a pathfinder or wayfarer or something in Te Whatu Ora?” Alex stopped himself, as a new thought occurred to him. “Or is this somehow a matter of morality for you? But let me assure you that while we might see ourselves, and indeed have others see us, in a strict dichotomy as either angel or devil, most of us are much more mixed.”

“You speak the truth,” declared Mike, nodding. Then he smiled. “You speak truth, but you have not grasped the whole of the truth.”

Alex bristled a little at this: he was not used to having his professional capability called into question. There would certainly be plenty to discuss with his supervisor! He managed to contain himself, and asked quietly, "What is the truth?"

Mike smiled again. "A question very much like that was asked of our Lord once," he said. "It was asked at the time that the war was about to become the fiercest. This is also where your moral point becomes sharpest, where humans and my fellows too had to make fundamental choices about whether to be on the side of the angels or of those who had exercised their God-given free will to go another way. 'What is truth?' was the question asked, and in the end the truth was revealed in victory on earth and in heaven, as the accused and executed man was brought again to life and as, in the spiritual realm, the dragon was thrown from the heavens. It was my privilege to have a part in that, but the victory was alone his, the Son of Man. And it was after this decisive battle that the Son of Man was led in to take up his throne beside the Ancient of Days, to enjoy the worship my companions and I continue to offer in our thousands upon thousands. It is a wondrous joy to attend him."

During this speech Mike's appearance seemed to shimmer before Alex's eyes. He tore off his glasses and polished them vigorously. It didn't help.

They were quiet for a time. Mike still sat ram-rod straight on his chair, such a calm, stern, dignity about him. Alex's racing heart gradually returned to normal.

Mike went on, quieter, the glow in his face subsiding a little. "But I see that I am not helping you, and thus you despair of helping me. You think I may be in some way confused; but it is you who is now confused. I have been oblique. So let me tell you plainly: I am an angel, a member of the heavenly host, the spiritual army of God Almighty."

There was an audible *crack* as Alex snapped his pencil. He set about rummaging in his desk drawer for a fresh one as Mike went on.

"I am an angel. God created us at the beginning of time to serve him in praise, as messengers between heaven and earth, to provide watchful protection to human believers, and execute God's judgement against his enemies. Normally you will not see us, but heaven and earth, the spiritual and material, are closer and more

intermingled that you may think, so we are always near. And there are times when it is helpful to make ourselves visible to the dimensions you inhabit.”

Alex swallowed. “So ‘Mike’, as in Michael? The archangel?”

“The same,” affirmed Mike.

“So why have you come here? Surely I don’t have anything to offer you!”

“In a way you do have something important to give me,” said Michael. “I am genuine in my frustration, and I fear that I, like some of my companions, might give up on humankind entirely and so choose to join the other side where there is no love for humankind whatsoever. The temptation is strong, I can tell you!”

“Temptation, eh?” said Alex as he stood and went to the bookcase that lined one wall of his study. He ran his finger along some of the volumes there, before extracting a classic on spiritual disciplines. He made to hand it to Michael, but Michael shook his head as a wry smile curled his lips.

“No, I don’t need that kind of help,” he said. “I know the book already, along with libraries more. No, the help I need is for you to heed my message, *the* message, and to share it.”

“Message?”, Alex gulped. “What message? And why me?”

“I’ve come to you because you are involved in a therapeutic ministry. And this has its place and importance, and will continue to bring comfort and healing to many. But in some ways it represents something of the problem I have. The same domestication I described in relation to my kind has also been happening with humankind’s attitude towards the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man. My name Michael means ‘Who is like God?’, and that name carries a deep and important truth. Unfortunately, humankind seems to want to turn God into something safe and capable of being ignored. People have an over concern with comfort and ease as primary goods, rather than the challenging but ultimately fulfilling calling of God to be

God's agents in the physical world as we angels are in the spiritual realm. (And, by the way, the spiritual disciplines can be helpful in equipping, strengthening, and hardening you for this calling – because battle is still being waged as the mop-up operations continue.) Your role, Alex, as an agent of God is one to be exercised in the whole of your life and work; just as those you minister to can exercise it in their own life and work. Will you take up your calling to witness to this demanding but all-fulfilling life?"

And with that, Michael was gone. The door and windows remained closed, but Alex felt a peculiar movement in the air. A rush of wings perhaps?

Alex was a bit nonplussed, but also felt a warm stirring of excitement deep inside. What should he do now? Who should he call? His supervisor? His vicar? And then his computer pinging and the next appointment flashed up: Mrs Couch, again. He sighed, and then just as there was the expected knock on his door, Alex had a fresh inspiration as to where he might usefully offer her counsel this time. And, glancing at the volume still in his hand, he recognised he had his own work to do on himself.

The door opened.

#### Sources:

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