

Michael and All Angels

I stand here in need of God's mercy and grace. May I speak in the name of the God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Maker of all things, seen and unseen. This is what we affirm to be our faith in the Nicene creed. God, creator of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen. The creator of you and me. The creator of trees and flowers, of the sea and of rivers, of animals small and great, of the sun, the moon, stars and the whole universe. God, the creator of all the things we can see around us, of the beauty that can bring joy to our hearts, of all the things that enable us to live and sustain us and of our fellow human beings, who enable us to live and learn in community. God, the maker of all things seen on this Earth and in the whole wide universe. And God the maker of all things unseen.

But what are these things unseen? Why is this in the Nicene creed? Today is the feast of Michael and All Angels, which is a good opportunity for us to reflect a bit on this unseen part of creation. Some of you might be quite understandably wondering, who this Michael is and why he is put together with all the angels?

The Michael celebrated by the Church today is the Archangel Michael. Archangel Michael is known as a sort of warrior angel. He is mentioned in the Bible as fighting against evil powers, both in the Hebrew Scriptures in the book of Daniel, as well as in the New Testament in the book of Revelations. He is described as a prince, as one of the greater angels.

Our first reading today from Hebrews makes it clear that all angels, including Michael, are not God, but servants of God, called to worship:

And again, when God brings the firstborn (Jesus) into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'

The main point of our first reading today is, that there is a significant difference between Jesus, the Son of God, and any angel. Jesus is God and angels are, like us, simply creatures of God, utterly dependent on God. God, the maker of all things, seen and unseen.

What ought we to make of this strangeness? What are we to make of a world hidden from the sight of our eyes? Many of us will trust greatly in our eyes, in what we can see with them, to understand and navigate this world. Our eyes are how we can know and understand the world around us. Or are they? What if our eyes might only partially be able to reveal the world to us? As people, who are blind or who are partially sighted well know, there are many different ways to perceive and understand the world.

Our gospel reading today hints at this reality. The encounter described here between Jesus and Nathanael is peculiar. Jesus and Nathanael meet for the first time, yet Jesus immediately declares:

'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'

And unsurprisingly, Nathanael wants to know how he knows him, considering this is their first encounter. And Jesus replies:

'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'

I sometimes wonder what Nathanael was doing or thinking under that fig tree before Philip came. Maybe nothing much, maybe whatever it was made what Jesus said even more significant for Nathanael. But most interestingly, Jesus wasn't physically there at the time, so whatever he perceived of Nathanael, before even meeting him, he did not see it with his eyes, but perceived it in some other way. Jesus, who is the Son of God, the maker of all things seen and unseen, has many different ways of perceiving the world and all that is and happens within it.

If you are anything like me, all this might well make you a little uncomfortable. Knowing and understanding can give us a sense of control in life, and most human beings like to have at least some control over their lives. Seeing is a crucial way for many of us to perceive the world, to know it and understand it. But what if what we see is not all there is? What if there is a world hidden from our eyes, unperceivable, unknowable with our eyes? What if there are things unseen, unperceived and therefore impossible for us to know and understand?

I find that a little unsettling. But then I remember that God is God and I am not. Only if I was God could I fully know and understand all things, but I am not. Our ability to perceive the world is limited. We all perceive God and the world differently and by listening to each other's different ways of perceiving God and the world, our understanding of God and the world can be broadened. B`ut it will always remain limited. Only few human beings ever perceive angels, and even if they do it is only ever for a moment. For most of us Michael and all angels are part of God's unseen creation.

And yet, in our gospel reading today, Jesus tells Nathanael:

‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

This hints at Nathanael and all of us someday being able to perceive all of God’s creation, all things seen and unseen. But what about in the meantime? What are we to make of a God, who is maker of all things seen and unseen? What are we to make of these hints of Michael and all angels, whom most of us have never perceived so far?

I think the most important thing this can teach us is humility. No matter how much we think we know and understand of the world, if we believe, as we affirm, in God the maker of all things seen and unseen, we have to admit, that we do not know it all. We cannot perceive all there is in this world. God is God and we are not. God’s creation is vaster than we can perceive.

And as we come to accept that our knowledge and understanding is limited, we are called to become humble learners, rather than know-it-alls. People, who listen and learn from everyone we encounter, because we know, that our perceiving and understanding of the world and God is limited. And by listening and learning from others, we might be able to humbly perceive just a little more of God and God’s seen and unseen creation.

Amen.