

St. Michael and All Angels

Rev. 12: 7ff.

Matt. 18: 1ff.

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

In the early 1970s it was customary for university students to find themselves required to take some art appreciation class in order to meet the degree requirements. Everyone compared notes to see which instructor had the easiest demands on time and memorization, and then promptly registered for that class. It might be on visual art, the history of art, or media. Most of us took a shot at the latter thinking it would be, at the very least, entertaining. Somewhere in the midst of the semester the class was required to watch a couple of “artsy” films and write a report describing the plot. One afternoon the group gathered and was told that on that day a Fellini film, *La Dolce Vita*, would be shown. The title is Italian and means: *The Sweet Life*. I remember 3 things: 1) I thought it would be better than listening to 2 hours of lecture (I was wrong); 2) It would probably be fun some of the time (I was wrong again); and 3) Only one brief scene proved to be memorable.

The scene in question involved a helicopter, a large statue of Christ suspended in flight that resembled the Flying Nun, the Vatican in Rome, some bikini clad sunbathers, and 2 easily distracted pilots. The apparent mission of the helicopter and crew was to deliver this stunning sculpture to the Vatican where it would be placed atop St. Peter’s Basilica. It flew over fields where people stopped and waved greetings, but on the way passed above a swimming pool where a number of young women were frolicking. Suddenly, the copter makes a U-turn from its destination and comes back around where the pilots try to communicate with the sunning beauties indicating they would be back!! You can imagine the reaction and laughter in a room filled with students! But then in an instant the camera pans to another image—the statue of Christ, followed by focusing in on His face, and the class becomes very quiet and perhaps a bit uncomfortable. There on the screen two realities stand in stark contrast; the modern fixation on immediate and trivial matters, and a deeper image about transcendent and eternal concerns. It was as if the film maker was suggesting that there is a battle taking place for what will captivate us.

Today is the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. I must confess that I started to ignore it and use the lessons for the 15th Sunday after the Trinity, the sayings on anxiety and the lilies of the field, because they would be easier to address. But this day places before us some very important matters. It points us to realities that are very much at the heart of the Christian faith. We live in a time where people hunger for meaning, for authentic connections, for a sense belonging, and the hope that there is **more to life than meets our eyes**, whether in the daily news or the ordinary moments that make up most of our days. And we do so amidst a world that tends to believe in only what it can touch, see, or measure. The world, and we as well, too often settle for the trivial when far greater gifts are available to us. Every Sunday we confess in the Nicene Creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is visible and invisible”. We are affirming that the creation is a gift from God, AND that there is something deeper and more real yet—a spiritual realm and quality that makes our lives whole!! St. Augustine, the theologian suggests that the Genesis text of creation is not referring to the celestial bodies when it speaks of God creating the ‘Heavens’, but the whole of the spiritual, for the creation of the firmament contains the cosmos!

The language in the Book of Revelation about a cosmic war may on first glance seem farfetched. We don’t speak in those terms anymore. But we do know full well that we experience conflicts

between what we confess to believe and what occurs around us and even in us every day. At some place in our being we know the truth of what Revelation is saying.

The names of antagonist and protagonist in our text are suggestive. Satan means literally “the Slanderer” or “Accuser”. Slander is the act of taking someone’s image or reputation and skewing it—distorting it so that it becomes less than what it really is meant to be. I cannot say that I have ever seen Satan, and I know that most people view this as less than a real being. But we see the effects of Satan’s distortion in the presence of evil in the world. We know mindless violence which has become far too common in our country and near daily killings in our own community. We see are fully aware of countries that take foreign aid and distribute it for weapons while children and parents starve in the streets and in sight of those who claim to have their best interest at heart. And closer to home we know the struggles in our own hearts where hostility and enmity crowd out our ability to love and care for our own family members. We recognize the political polarizations that lead us to demonize those with whom we differ. The surface actions speak to a spiritual reality underneath.

On the other hand we are told that Michael stands as a sign of God’s reign in spite of other forces that would take hold and capture us. The name Michael in Hebrew means “He who is like God”. He represents the reality of the eternal which breaks into our world reminding us that what we see is not all there is. Why does the Church hold a day to celebrate angels? Everyone here has heard the word, Gospel. It comes from the Greek “Euangelion”. In the middle of that foreign sounding word is the word “angel”. We have had, in recent years, an interest in angels. There are a multitude of books on the topic, shows like “Touched by an Angel”, movies with titles like “Angels and Demons”, and a flock of figurines of pudgy cherubs that can be bought like so many trinkets. I think in part it is an indication of the hungering after something more than meets our regular view of life. But we should not settle for such trivializing. For our faith angels are messengers meant to remind of us of God’s ultimate victory over the forces of evil and sin. Michael is a fore runner. Who else is it that for us is like God? Who is it that for our sake has overcome sin and death and already put a final note of victory on the world? Who is it that tells us today that to care for the vulnerable and childlike is to welcome Him? Who is it that reminds us that to settle for and put our trust in finite things as if hope could be found in them is to experience the loss of all we hope for? It is Christ.

This day is meant to call us from slumbering with the illusion that the spiritual is less than real. (I wonder if you find it as amusing as I do when I think about how easily we discount the notion of an intelligence that is without a body, and yet see around us bodies with little signs of intelligence!) It is a gift to recall us to listen to God and nurture the relationship He offers us. It is a day when we are reminded that we are to be absorbed into God’s life, grace, and unflinching love rather than to be eaten a small piece at a time by a world that hungers after the wrong things. What do we pray in our liturgy? With angels and archangels and all the company of heaven we laud and magnify thy glorious name...This is the gift of being called once again to see what is holy and true and to participate fully in Him. Amen+