

## SERMON ON THE ARCHANGELS, ST. JAMES' CHURCH SUSSEX GARDENS 30.9.2017

In their epic struggle on the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem Jesus reminded Satan that God has given a command to his angels that we should be guarded in all our ways. What does it mean for us to walk and live and work in the presence of angels? What it does not mean is that we get to look particularly angelic. A journalist went to a Benedictine monastery of nuns here in England to do a feature on life as a nun. She interviewed a sister and asked if she had been surprised that God had called her to this vocation. 'Well, yes, I was surprised', was the candid reply, 'but not half as surprised as I am that he should have called some of the others we've got in here'. We heard in today's Gospel the words of Nathanael, a man so guileless and honest that he couldn't dissemble his disappointment at the poor impression Jesus made on him, 'Can any good come out of Nazareth?' It's the same disappointment that we hear from John the Baptist, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?' The problem with Jesus, apparently, was that he didn't come across as particularly Messianic.

'Who is like God?' is the meaning of the name Michael. And of course the answer is no one. God is utterly Other, utterly unique and part of our proclamation of the Gospel is to make that clear amid the increasing idolatries of this world which seek to place something or someone other than God at the centre of life. Our society is awash with idolatries, whether the idolatry of fame and glamour in celebrity culture or the idolatry of social, economic and political security as currently peddled by governments like those of Russia, North Korea and the United States, not to mention Brexit. We are being sold the myth that we are or can be in control, and it is false. Who is like God? No one, and many of the woes of our world and of people's individual lives are down to the fact that they are accepting substitutes for God. But there is a paradoxical sense in which there is another, entirely contrary answer to Michael's question. In twenty-six years of ministry in Holloway Prison I found myself alongside women who had lost all sense of their own worth: prostitutes, drug addicts, murderers, the violent and the violated, the lost and the broken. To them the answer to 'who is like God?' is emphatically 'you are – we all are', because by the miracle of our creation we are made in the image and likeness of God, and God recognizes in us a kindred spirit. Many of those to whom we minister the Gospel today have a catastrophically damaged sense of self-worth. To them our message must be that we are like God and God is so like us that God became one of us in Jesus, and by this we are saved from whatever darkness we live in.

If you visit the Sainte Chapelle in Paris you will see in the tympanum above the entrance a typical scene of the last judgement. Jesus is sitting enthroned in glory. Around him are gathered the souls of the dead, and the angels are busy sorting them out for judgement. Satan on one side and Michael on the other are weighing souls. If a person's bad deeds outweigh their good ones, he or she gets taken by Satan to Hell. Satan is watching gleefully, waiting for his due, but what he has failed to notice is that Michael is surreptitiously leaning on the scales to ensure that as many souls as possible come to Heaven. It would appear that, when it comes to our eternal salvation, God is not above a little sleight of hand... I once told this story to the women in Holloway and one of them was scandalized that I should have accused God of cheating, 'God could never stoop so low!' she insisted. But God could and did stoop as low as it gets, two thousand years ago in Bethlehem, when he came to dwell among us. 'Who is like God?' We know the answer to that in Jesus.

Gabriel's name means 'God is my strength'. This is a comforting thought, but we need a considerable amount of faith and trust to believe it. Gabriel appears at the annunciations to Zechariah and to Mary, whose annunciation is a parallel of the encounter between the angel and Gideon in the Book of Judges. 'Hail, strong warrior, the Lord is with you', says the angel, but Gideon is not convinced. 'Who are you calling strong warrior? I'm the youngest and most insignificant member of the least of the tribes of Israel – are you sure you haven't come to the wrong address?' For Mary, it's a similar response. As a young virgin she is the least of the least in a culture which had no value for women except as bearers of children, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' Gideon goes on to ask more awkward questions, 'If the Lord is with us, how come all these terrible things are happening to us?' It's a reasonable question and one again which Mary might justifiably have asked. If we don't look particularly angelic, our world and our church don't look particularly saved either, and this can be a real assault on our faith. God is our strength. Zechariah is unable to believe this when Gabriel appears to him in the sanctuary to tell him that, beyond all the evidence, he will have a son. He knows he is old and impotent, his wife Elizabeth old and sterile. We heard earlier this morning some sobering statistics about national Christian membership: empty churches, failing congregations – a church that is growing old, impotent and sterile. Can we believe, in the face of this evidence, that God will bring new life among us, or are we going to be like Zechariah, dumb and overwhelmed by cynicism and depression, which are two of the most besetting temptations among those in ministry? God is our strength. We don't do evangelization out of our own strength and power – that is a sure route to failure. We do it out of an unshakable faith in the strength of God, shining through our human weakness.

Raphael's name means 'God is my healer'. Evangelization brings us face to face with our own woundedness and that of the world around us. We heard earlier today about the need to be Eucharistic communities. As someone from the Roman Catholic tradition I want to add to that the

need for us to be communities of reconciliation. When Jesus appeared to his disciples in the Upper Room his first words were 'Peace be with you', but he followed these up with some quite terrifying words: 'Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven. Whose sins you shall retain, they are retained'. What does it mean to retain someone's sins, and what is the effect on them when we do this? It is certainly part of Christian evangelization to speak truth to power, and to name as sinful what is evil in our world. Christians are required to be truth speakers. But we can only do this if we first know and acknowledge ourselves to be sinners – loved and forgiven sinners, but sinners nonetheless. As sinners who have known and experienced the amazing grace of God that heals, forgives and transforms our lives we offer that same healing and transformation to others through the power of Jesus. To retain another's sins, to refuse them healing and the possibility of repentance by judging them to be beyond redemption or to fail through any other reason to proclaim God's determination to forgive is to deny the message of angels – God is our healer.

There is so much evidence all around us that faith is failing, that the world is falling into self-imposed chaos and idolatry and that sin is overwhelming us. But God continues to weigh the scales in our favour. Who is like God? No one, and only in God will we find fulfilment and salvation. Who is like God? We are, and that divine image and likeness which we share with Jesus our brother will never leave us. We have only to reach out for him to be flooded with grace. God is our strength, despite any sense of vulnerability, impotence and sterility we may feel as individuals and as communities. God is our healer, and there is no sin and no wound beyond God's mercy. If we can hold even a glimmer of faith in all this, proclaiming it to our world through our evangelizing presence, however humble that may be, we will experience our life and our world as charged with the grandeur of God and ablaze with the glory of the angels.