

26/09/2021 Matthew 18:1-10 St Michael and All Angels

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The topic of angels can seem remote from everyday life,
And even as Christian people we can live the life of faith
Without giving angels a second thought.

Yet when we read the Scriptures, and the Gospels in particular,
Angels feature prominently.

For example, the chief parts of Jesus' life and ministry
Include the angles; so:

Angels announce Jesus' conception; they announce his birth,
And in fact we regularly join in the angelic acclamation at Jesus' birth:
Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.

Angels attend Jesus in his temptation, in the garden before his death.

Angles announce his resurrection and proclaim ascension and coming in glory.

Of course, we could be tempted to think that this inclusion of angels

Perhaps adds narrative colour to Jesus' life

But is not that important to how *we* live as Christians,

Or that Jesus himself wasn't particularly interested in the angelic realm.

And yet when we turn to the Gospels we hear Jesus including the angels

In his teaching at many places.

Particularly, it seems to me, *when it comes to understanding our status.*

So: Jesus brings angels into his teaching when we are tempted

To treat the human community as if it is the court of last appeal.

And he brings in the angels when we are tempted to think

That wielding authority, especially in the church

Means that we can mistreat those

Who are smaller, weaker, less powerful, and more vulnerable than we are.

Today I'll be departing from the set readings for St Michael and All Angels

To hand on teaching given by Jesus to his disciples, to us,

When the question of true greatness in God's kingdom arises.

I'll be proclaiming the good news that Jesus Christ

Shows us that true authority is seen when those who are strong

Use their strength in the protection of and welcome to the little ones.

And I'll be proclaiming the good news that we welcome Jesus

In the presence of the holy angels

As we receive his body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of sins.

Today we'll be receiving teaching

That comes from the first ten verses of Matthew 18.

It's very similar to teaching we heard recently from Mark's Gospel,

But today I'll be focusing on the angelic theme in the text.

Here's how the reading starts:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'

OK: in this text we have Jesus and his disciples,

And what follows has its genesis in this question that the disciples ask Jesus.

It's not the question about who is the greatest among *the disciples*,

Although we know that they did argue among themselves about that,

Rather it's a question about who the greatest is *in God's kingdom*,

About who is the greatest of God's subjects *from God's* point of view.

Firstly: How would you answer that question?

Especially if you broadened your scope to include *all* of God's creatures?

Secondly: how do you think Jesus is going to respond?

It could be, after all, that he will chastise them for asking about status at all.

But listen to how he responds: **He *called* a child, whom he *put* among them,**
We'll pause here.

Notice what Jesus does. First, he *calls* the child.

'Calling' is a big deal in the Gospels, and in the Christian life.

It's a word particularly associated with discipleship:

We can't *choose* to be disciples, we must be *called*.

Secondly he put the child among them:

Literally, he *stood* the child in their midst.

Now if you're familiar with vocation and station teaching in Lutheran theology,

It seems to me something like this is happening here:

Jesus calls the child, he gives the child their vocation,

And he stands the child, he gives the child a station,

A place in the community of disciples.

In case this is a bit abstract think about how the pastoral ministry works:

First one is called, not simply inwardly,

But especially outwardly, *through the church*.

I could say, 'I feel called by God, therefore you must have me

In a position of authority as a pastor.' But that wouldn't be godly authority.
No: God calls, to be sure not the unwilling but the willing, through the church.

Then one is *placed, stationed*, in a congregation or another place of service.
Just because I felt like I should be a pastor doesn't mean I was called,
And just because I was called
Doesn't mean that I could stand here, in this pulpit.
In our church we have the language of 'installation' for pastors
And other servants of the church: people are *called* and *placed*
Into the midst of the gathering of disciples.
In our world people may push themselves forward to grab for power,
And they might push others out of the way to stand in the place of prominence.
But that is not how it is in the kingdom of God.

Now there may be a certain greatness, a certain status, in the kingdom of God
In serving as a minister,
And I can't help but feel this is behind the disciples question:
That is, 'How great are we, who are serving with you, Jesus?'
But Jesus starts by demonstrating that at the heart of discipleship
Is being called and placed by the Lord.
And it's significant, of course, that Jesus calls and places a *child*.
Listen to the text: **[Jesus] called a child, whom he put among them, and said,
'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never
enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the
greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**

In one sense to become like a child
Is to not push ourselves forward, especially into leadership,
And especially into leadership in the church.
But notice how Jesus specifies the actual child that he has called and placed:
This child has shown true humility in *responding* to the *call*,
And in *allowing* themselves to be *placed* by Jesus.
That's the first thing that Jesus is teaching his disciples; is teaching us.
True greatness in the kingdom can only come in response
To God's call on our lives, to standing faithfully where God has placed us.
No matter what our particular calling may be,
No matter where God has placed us in life.

But how Jesus goes on is challenging, even, as it goes on, threatening; he says:
Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

First of all, in the Christian community the child is the ambassador of Jesus,
So that when we welcome the little ones called and placed by Jesus
We welcome Jesus himself.

Conversely, whoever harms such a child is answerable to God.

Listen to what Jesus says: **'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling-blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling-block comes!**

To my mind a clear example of what Jesus is talking about
Would be the sexual abuse of a child,
Especially by someone in a position of leadership in the church.

If a child suffers such abuse,

We know that it can make them stumble in the life of faith:

How can they trust God, if this is how they are treated those called to lead?

If this is the sort of service they get from those called and placed

In positions of authority by the church, by God?

It's easy to understand why Jesus goes on to give his disciples stern warnings
About how they should look to themselves

To avoid stumbling in their own life of faith: **'If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.**

Again, notice that this is the language of Jesus *to his disciples*.

This hell-fire language is not how Jesus speaks to the crowds:

To them he speaks only in parables.

This is how he speaks to his disciples, to us

Who know that he speaks out of deep love for us,

That he wants to save us from the path of destruction,

Especially, the context suggests to me, the destruction that those in authority
Call down upon themselves if they abuse the little ones in their care.

In fact Jesus closes this section of teaching with these words: **'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.**

There's the mention of the angels:

Jesus *chooses* to mention the angels at this point in his teaching,

And to include a curious detail:

That these angels continually see the face of the Father in heaven.

What could be going on?

Well, remember this whole section of teaching

Flows from the disciples' question about *status*,

About who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Early on I asked how *you* would answer that question.

For me: I would have said the angels, especially the front-rank angels,

In one sense I think this is part of what Jesus is saying:

That there are angels and archangels, there is the whole company of heaven,

There is a divine hierarchy, and there are angels in the front rank,

Those who see God *face to face*.

But he is also saying: see how it is in God's reign, in God's rule:

The most important angles show their glory, their greatness,

In serving the little ones.

This, by the way, is the text that forms the basis for the church's meditation

On guardian angles.

But from this perhaps other-worldly teaching,

Jesus makes a here and now point: authority in the church

Is exercised rightly when the little ones are honoured and cared for.

Well, Sunday by Sunday we meet together as a church,

Whether we are old or young,

Whether we are mature or little ones in the life of faith.

And we acknowledge in our liturgy,

That as God serves us, we meet together also with angels and archangels,

And with the whole company of heaven.

And that we experience Christ coming to us in his hidden glory

Sunday by Sunday we hear these words: ***Therefore with angels and archangels,
and with all the company of heaven, we adore and magnify your glorious
name, evermore praising you and saying:***

And we respond by joining in the angelic hymn of praise:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts;

heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

And our Lord *calls* us to come forward, to the altar

To where we could never call ourselves,

And our Lord gives us a *place* us at his table,

Where we, like children, with nothing to give and everything to receive,

Receive the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

And so we have status, given to us a gift:

We are sons and daughters of the Father,

And as loved children of the Father we are freed to welcome each other,

And especially to welcome the little ones.

And as we welcome them, our Lord welcomes us,

And we experience what greatness is in God's kingdom.