

## Farewell Sermon

## St Michael and all Angels

Well, this is my last word to you. My time has come. An aunt of mine was travelling on the continent before the war and asked for an early morning call. At the appointed time the phone rang and a voice announced in clipped tones, 'Good morning. Your time has come. Goodbye.' That woke her up!

Now my time has come the first thing I want to do is to express my heartfelt thanks to all of you here – and many others beside – who have been such a support and encouragement to me in my nearly 17 years as bishop. I feel that I have received so much more than I have given. I am profoundly grateful – to you and to God.

It's a joy to me that this final opportunity to talk to you falls on the feast of St Michael and all the Angels. I want now to encourage you to believe in angels of which our readings speak because to do so, I suggest, is a sign of humility, humanity and humour, the three hums about which I spoke in my enthronement sermon getting on for 17 years ago, which I feel should characterise the Christian life,

To believe in angels is an act of humility. It is to accept that there is so much that we cannot know or understand in this life. It is to be connected to a bigger picture of the universe, part of the story God is telling about the cosmos which is more

wonderful than anything we can see or understand; it is to submit to mystery. The secularised mind is terrified by mystery. So it analyses, labels, makes lists and systems, assigns roles and solves problems. I've been involved in all that – but a solved life is necessarily a diminished and impoverished life. Let's celebrate mystery – physicists have had to get used to doing and people of faith should be unapologetic about doing the same. Let's be full of wonder for, as Albert Einstein wrote:

*Whoever is devoid of wonder, whoever remains unmoved, whoever cannot contemplate or know the deep shudder of the soul in enchantment, might just as well be dead for they have already closed their eyes upon life.*

To believe in angels is to embrace not only humility but our true and deepest humanity. It's so easy for us to regress to the half living of which comprises the unredeemed life - craving after comfort, status, influence, money, material benefit, popularity, piety. If we are to embrace our full humanity, we need to remember that we are part of a *love story*. Angels are messengers, part of whose role is to remind us of God's love. Love is what lies at the heart of our humanity and, indeed all that is because, as St John makes clear, *God is love* so St Augustine wrote that we know only in so far as we love. We need to lay aside our rationalising and reducing and solving - none of which ever advanced the causes of love.

The Christian faith has always made sense to me because it tunes with my experience, positing that right at the heart and ground of everything that is there is love, which I recognise to be the most significant thing in my life. And the fullness of our humanity is released in humble, joyful, loving service of God and others and thereby to discover that abundance of life which Christ yearns to give to all His children.

It is in the nature of love that it should flow outwards and as it does so, multiply, as a simple thought experiment reveals. Imagine you have total power, and you decide to share it with nine others. How much do you have left? One tenth of what you had when you began. Suppose you have a thousand pounds, and you decide to share it with nine others. How much do you have left? One tenth of what you had when you began. But now suppose that you decide to share, not power, not wealth, but love, with nine others. How much do you have left? Not less but more; perhaps more than ten times more.

So that's two hums – humility and humanity. Thirdly, to believe in angels is to embrace humour. After all, believing in angels is about as loony as Sarah believing, in her nineties, that she would conceive and bear a child. That's where the word laughter first appears in the Bible: in Genesis, where Sarah overhears God telling Abraham that she's going to bear a child. She found it hilarious. But God was true to his promise and Isaac – the name means 'he laughed' – was born.

Humour is a true sign of the Kingdom. Characteristic of the great saints is their power of levity. Laughter gets things in proportion. It's the purest form of our response to God's acceptance of us. Mirth, like charity, has to begin at home. When I laugh at myself, I accept myself, warts and all. To sit light to yourself is true humility. Pride cannot rise to levity. As G. K. Chesterton observed, pride is the downward drag of all things into an easy solemnity. Sadly, a heavy seriousness is as natural to humanity as falling. 'It was by the force of gravity that Satan fell.'

Humour, on the other hand, lifts. It's weird – almost as weird as angels, though we take it for granted. In one of Christopher Fry's plays an ageing couple talk of decay and mortality. 'Shall we laugh?' asks the man. 'For what reason?' asks the woman. 'For the reason of laughter,' is the reply, 'since laughter is the surest touch of genius in creation. Would you ever have thought of it? That same laughter, madam, is an irrelevancy which almost amounts to revelation.'

If we can have the humility, humanity and humour to believe in angels, we shall understand that we are part the greatest love story ever told, the story of the illimitable love of God which embraces you and me and the whole creation. We shall understand that nothing is secular, nor ever has been, neither things nor people but that, on the contrary, everything has been made sacred in its origin by God and everything has been

consecrated by humanity made divine. We shall see that our lives, yours and mine, an imperceptible breath in the great whole, are an indispensable part of this great love story. We shall see that the whole creation, despite the dreadful damage of sin, is a long throb of love towards love eternal. We shall see that the whole universe, every immeasurable fraction of it, all of time and the vast reaches of the ages, every wound and hurt, every struggle and loss, every going down to loss is there, for nothing in God's economy of things will be wasted. We shall glimpse every leaf that ever was and every road not taken, every heart-stopping moment since the foundation of the earth, held together in one great colossal shout of praise, the great final 'Amen' of a transfigured creation.

As we see and feel the illimitable and unconditional love of God, that long rope which stretches right into hell itself and out the other side, we shall be able to laugh at our fears and the small mindedness of men and women that they seek to limit not only one another but God. Then we shall be able to shout 'Amen' as the tears begin to flow tears of sheer, glorious, unutterable resurrection joy.

I pray that we shall all be given grace to embrace the three hums and , as we do so, may God bless this Diocese of Worcester richly in its life and witness, may it really hum, until that day comes when, at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every

tongue confess, together with the holy angels, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.