

Michaelmas (2024)

Edward King was Bishop of Lincoln from 1885 to 1910 in the Church of England.

He was controversial because of some of his high church practices; nevertheless, he was regarded by all who know him as a man of great holiness and sanctity.

A remarkable story is told about him. Once he was called out on a dark and stormy night to visit a woman who was dying. He set out on foot to make the journey.

Unbeknownst to him it was a ruse. Some unsavory fellows purposed to rob him and do him bodily harm.

But their plans were foiled. When he came to the place where they were lurking . . . as they themselves would go on to confess. . . they saw not one man – Bishop King – but several, both

big and powerful. Needless to say, they did not proceed with their plan.

Who were the big men with Bishop King?

Can we doubt that they were ministering spirits sent by God.

Do I believe in angels because of Bishop King's experience?

No, I believe in them because Jesus believed in them, spoke about them and because the inspired scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, bear witness to their existence.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus talking about children. He says: **“That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father.”** That's enough for me. Bishop King's story and others like it are mere confirmations.

Angels are of a special order . . . no, you don't get your wings when you die. That's non-biblical sentimental nonsense.

One of the functions of angels is to deliver messages. That is what Gabriel did at the Annunciation . . . announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of the Messiah.

But they also serve as warriors and protectors of God's people.

In today's reading from Revelation, Michael is seen taking on this role. He defeats and expels the devil from heaven on behalf of God's chosen people. The conflict with evil on earth still has to be carried out, but God's ultimate victory is assured. This seems to be the thrust of this passage.

Angels are real. You may not see them, but they are there, as we are reminded in one of our hymns:

Fear not the secret foe;
Far more o'er thee are watching
Than human eyes can know.

So be encouraged. Whenever you find yourself alone or afraid, say:

“Thank you, Lord, that you not only know my situation, my fears and dangers, but that you have me covered. I rest in your peace.”

That’s a preliminary thought as we celebrate today the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels.

Over the centuries, a number of customs have grown up around this day, not the least, the custom of eating goose. Now, I doubt that anyone has brought a goose for today’s brunch. That’s okay. I am sure we will have enough food of all sorts to go around!

But, before I move on, I need to add a note of warning: Nowhere in scripture are we encouraged to have an unhealthy fascination with angels, let alone to worship them.

Indeed, Paul in Colossians 2:18 is very explicit on this point: **“Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels . . .”**

With that said, I want to spend the rest of the time that is mine focusing on this morning’s Old Testament reading. Here, we find angels showing up and providing protection in a way not too different from the way they did on behalf of Bishop Edward King.

This dramatic demonstration of God’s power took place in the days of Elisha. Elisha was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. You might remember that he succeeded Elijah.

In those days, there was a crisis. The Syrians to the north were at war with Israel, but God kept revealing their knavish plots to Elisha who in turn would relay them to the King of Israel.

So, frustrated was his counterpart to the north that he suspected that one in his inner circle was a spy for the King of Israel. Then one of his men stepped forward and explained what was really going on.

There was prophet in Israel to whom the living God revealed secrets. Nothing the king said even in his bedroom was hid from Elisha. I dare say that the king of Syria's wife could not have been too happy if she had found out that!

In any event, the king's strategy was to send an army and capture this pesky prophet and get him out of the way.

But, as we saw in our reading, his plan was foiled just as the plan to harm Bishop Edward King was foiled.

The Syrian army surrounded the city of Dothan where Elisha and his servant were staying. Elisha's servant looked out, saw the soldiers and cried out, **“What shall we do?”**

Elisha's servant's response was not unlike our own when we find ourselves in a tight. All too often, the first words out of our mouths are “What am *I* going to do?”

We once had in this church an old gentleman who had been the mayor of Duluth, Minn. He was a man of great faith and piety.

Once he was involved in an automobile accident down towards Atlanta. His car had to be towed, leaving him without a way to get home.

But instead of saying what Elisha's servant said, he (as he told me later) bowed his head and said: "Okay, Lord, what are *you* going to do now?"

He said that no sooner than he had spoken those words and lifted his head, he saw a Ford dealership on the other side of the road.

And so, he went over and bought a new car. Thank goodness he had the resources to do so, but that was God's answer for his dilemma that day.

How do you handle crisis situations? How do I?

Do we go the way of Elisha's servant or the way of the man I have just told about? Is our focus on ourselves or on God? Something to think and pray about.

As the story continues, Elisha assures his servant that there are more with them than there are with the Assyrian army.

On the surface that statement defied rationality. It even bordered on insanity. All you had to do was to look out the window.

But then Elisha asked God to open his eyes. When that prayer was answered, the servant saw things beyond human reckoning. The veil between God's world and ours was pulled back.

We need our eyes opened as well, not just in times of fear and danger, but in ordinary situations of life.

Yesterday afternoon I rushed into one of our local grocery stores. When I got ready to check out, lines to the till were spread out in all directions.

I got in the shortest and then noticed that it wasn't moving. In a few minutes, a store official advised everyone in that line to move to another. We were told the cash register had 'frozen up'.

Understandably, no one was happy. But a woman in the new line came through as we finally approached the young man who was running the cash register. She said: **“You are looking a little stressed. I just want to say, we appreciate you.”**

His countenance changed as did the attitude of those in line.

This woman's eyes were opened to a greater reality. Instead of seeing a problem – a long wait at the till – she saw an opportunity, an opportunity to provide encouragement. May our eyes be so opened.

Going back to our story. Everything changed when the eyes of Elisha's servant were opened to God's reality. Fear was replaced with faith.

Elisha was not just whistling in the wind when he said: There are more with us than there are with them.

God's reality is greater than our reality. Because of this, we can say with the Psalmist: **“GOD is our hope and strength, a very present help in trouble” (46:1)**

On this Feast of St. Michael and all Angels:

We rejoice in the many ways God provides, defends and brings about his purposes of good in the world.

In particular, we recognize and give thanks for the ministration of angels.

We don't worship them. We don't obsess over them. We don't sentimentalize them. But we do recognize that they are real and sent by God.

We give thanks that God has us covered. ///

Open my eyes, Lord, and keep them open.
May this be our prayer now and always.