


Michaelmas Year C – St Helen’s, Abingdon
28 September 2025



Genesis 28.10–17 / Revelation 12.7–12 / John 1.47–51

This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven....

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

MEDIEVAL THEOLOGIANS GET A BLACK EYE for triviality and hair-splitting — at least, those who still had hairs to split — for allegedly spending too much time arguing over how many angels could dance on the head of a needle. Now, as it turns out, nobody *actually* debated this point; it was made up by Protestant polemicists to poke fun at people such as St Thomas Aquinas, whose theology touched on topics such as whether angels occupied physical space (a much more interesting question), and to dishonour Catholic theological thought while at the same time constructing a compendium of doctrine that mirrored, in many respects, the Catholic theology they mocked.

It’s all a big mistake, if you ask me. Angels are messengers from God: literally, both in Hebrew and in Greek, the very words מַלְאָכִים and ἄγγελος we read as ‘angel’ are the plain everyday words for ‘messenger’. There’s nothing about the words themselves that indicate a special sort of metaphysical being with white robes and shimmering wings. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue — if you’ll be patient for a moment or two — that angels are entirely *imaginary* beings, and that’s okay. I don’t mean they’re imaginary in the sense of ‘not existing at all’; that would be a silly waste of time. Rather, I mean that

just as the square root of -2 is an *imaginary* number, so *angels* are imaginary beings. We take the topic of angels to think through God's ways with the world, with us, and how we know about them. So any argument we might have about what an angel *must be like* turns out to be an argument about our imagination, our imagination of God and of Jesus and of the whole theological cornucopia.

You might think of angels as heavenly comforters, guardian angels, who observe and support and protect us. That way of imagining angels emphasises God's role as creator, as judge, as our Father, but without presuming to suppose that God the Eternal Father, strong to save, whose arm hath bound the restless wave has directly and personally zeroed in on our lives and predicaments and has intervened with cosmic history on our behalf. Instead, we imagine the angel as a lesser divine power with more time and fewer conflicting obligations, who can afford to focus just on us; and if things don't go our way, perhaps the angel was overruled by a greater destiny. That's a very common way of imagining angels.

Or we may imagine them as part of the Great Chain of Being, filling in the vast abyss between the God the Holy Trinity on High (on one hand) and you and me (on the other). That's a *big* gap: God is different from us in *so many* ways that it takes whole *divisions* of angels to connect the chain between humanity and divinity. This way of imagining angels assigns them various roles and functions; it gives us the great hymn that we just sang today, 'Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones', that lists out the nine choirs (as they're called) of angels: Watchers, Holy Ones, Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Princedoms, Powers, Virtues, Archangels, and just plain garden-variety Angels. I'm not sure whether many *everyday* people think about angels with this degree of detail, but these hierarchies of angels turn up in books and films; there were Watchers in the *Noah* film from a few years ago, and various ranks of angels appear in science fiction and fantasy stories — powerful evidence for the persistent strength of this way of

imagining angels.

If we're willing to *think with* angels rather than trying to pin down their ontological essence, we can read the Bible more patiently, we can look at the images of angels in Western art history and in our own churches more appreciatively, we can praise God's abundance more richly, and we can grow in our own spirituality toward a faith that *more goes on* than meets the eye, without getting panicky about just exactly what that 'more' might look like. Indeed, we can take a cue from 'Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones' to recognise that the vast varieties of angels suggests a *depth* and a *diversity* of spiritual goings-on that derive *from* God, without being themselves *equal to* God, or as *ordinary* as we are. We can sing 'Ye Holy Angels Bright' without worrying about the extent of their luminance; and instead to marvel at the ways God *enlightens* us by heavenly messages and ordinary hints and clues. We can comfortably believe angels exist, without fretting about exactly *how*, or what they're made from, or *why* some people encounter them all the time when we don't. We can let angels inhabit our imaginations, fill our thoughts with God's presence, with God's messages, and on Michaelmas we can give thanks for all the incredibly vast range of created things, from Watchers and Holy Ones to rocks and bugs and dust and even odd old human beings such as we are. We can praise God for St Michael and All Angels, for all Ye Holy Angels Bright, the Angels We Have Heard on High,

✠ in the Name of Christ, the fair glory of the Holy Angels,
and of the Father, and of the Holy Spirit —

Amen