

**Sunday, September 29, 2024**  
Saint Michael and All Angels

**Solemn Eucharist**  
11:00 am

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A Sermon by  
The Very Rev. Dominic Barrington, *Dean of York*

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**Thou shalt see greater things than these.**



*Saint Michael depicted above the World War I Memorial at Saint Thomas Church*

*Even in a time of horrors and happenings, 1971 stood out as a tumultuous year. So wrote John Henken of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.*

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*The air war in Vietnam escalated and ground combat spread to Laos and Cambodia. India and Pakistan went to war. Algeria nationalized all French oil and gas companies within its borders. 42 people were killed in a five-day riot at the Attica prison in New York. and violence in Northern Ireland worsened. Charles Manson was convicted of murdering Sharon Tate. The United States devalued the dollar, and President Nixon ordered a 90-day wage and price freeze to curb inflation. The passing of artists and cultural figures as diverse as Igor Stravinsky, Louis Armstrong, Rockwell Kent, and Coco Chanel seemed to signify the end of an era.*

And in that year, maybe in response to those events, the great maestro Leonard Bernstein wrote his extraordinary *Mass*. I first came across the piece at the recommendation of my wife.

She trained as a flutist at one of London's top conservatoires, and one of the highlights of her time there was when the entire school came together to perform Bernstein's *Mass*. If you know the work you will understand that a conservatoire is an excellent institution to mount a performance of this piece, because the resources it requires are enormous, making it quite a financial challenge for any regular symphony series or concert hall to include it in a season of music.

It is not, of course, a liturgical mass such as that we are hearing performed this morning. It's an oratorio around the mass grappling with the complexities of faith in a broken, fallen, challenged world. A world challenged by all the horrible things that go on era by era.

The icing on the cake for my wife and her fellow students at the Guildhall was that this performance was the climax of a whole week devoted to the music of Bernstein – a week for which the great man himself was in residence. And so, on the afternoon of this vast undertaking, they staged the dress rehearsal of the *Mass* in front of the composer. Throughout it all, the great man sat there, ignoring the 'no smoking' signs and getting through cigar after cigar, watching the great drama of his music unfold.

After the final measures, silence fell, and the composer made his way slowly towards the stage, took his cigar out of this mouth to speak, looked at the assembled performers, and, after a pause, said, "You angels. You *wonderful* angels."

Except – this being Maestro Bernstein of whom I speak – that's not quite the turn of phrase that he used. I think that if I were to substitute the real word he uttered, I'm not sure that Father Turner would invite me back!

But, as Jesus reminded us, **you will see greater things than these** – and even, perhaps hear them.

Today we celebrate that great feast of the church to do with angels. And, very sadly, in the era in which we live, angels seem to have become a gimmick, a superstition, and a way of making money by unscrupulous people on the internet. If you google "how to get angels to help me", there are all sorts of products and websites on which you can throw away your hard-earned dollars and cents, while demonstrating no sense at all!

It's good, therefore, to be reminded in the Scriptures we just heard read about the role of angels – the role of angels in dealing with **Good News**. The Good News that the words of Scripture, the Good News that God intends for us and for all God's children. *For in you* God says to Jacob, *all the families of the earth shall be blessed*. All of them. *In you and your offspring*.

And that is the Lord's message to Jacob – who is kind of a messed up guy – when he has that extraordinary dream, when the ladder is set up between earth and heaven. Set up so that the angels – the angels of God – can move between earth and heaven. But did you notice that all important point, contained in Genesis, and quoted by Jesus in the gospel we heard?

It was given to us twice. First they ascend, and then they descend. Which may not be what you had been expecting. This feast is not about bewinged asexual creatures with harps popping down to earth to help us win the lottery, aid our love life, help us find a promotion or anything else like that (despite the promises of so many websites) – this is about those of us who dwell here on the ground floor, here on earth – this is about us being given a vision of the real Good News – Good News that exists only in an undiluted form in that place where God's reign is now assured – that place which we call heaven.

It is good to be with you this morning and to bring you greetings from the original and ancient city of York and its breathtaking cathedral York Minster, of which I have the great privilege to be the Dean. Some of you, I am sure, have visited it, and will know that one of its glories – for me its crowning glory – is its Great East Window. The largest stained glass window in Great Britain. A window based around the Revelation to John.

It's a work of great drama – the book, and therefore the window. And, effectively, it is about telling us that all the bad things that happen – the bad things in the context of which Bernstein wrote his extraordinary *Mass* in 1971 – and all the bad things happening today in the Middle East, in Ukraine, and across the world – it is about telling us that the bad things don't get the last word.

They do not get the last word because, complicated to read though the Revelation to John is, full of such strange imagery, numerical codes, monsters, battles and all the rest of it – it is a book written simply to say that you can't keep a good God down, and that Good News will triumph. It's a book written for those called to be angels. A book written for those of us, who as we gather together in worship, get once again that glimpse of heaven in word and sacrament – a glimpse of God's reign that cannot be overcome. A book written for us, who will then be told, at the end of mass, not to stay huddled in this beautiful space, but to get out there through the doors and to be angelic, and proclaim the Good News. For we have, indeed, seen greater things than a man sitting under a fig tree, or anything else.

I opened this sermon by quoting a scholarly program note about Bernstein's *Mass* from the LA Philharmonic. Let me close by quoting words from the great man himself, who wrote in the program for the first performance of this extraordinary work (and I sort of apologise to the man in Los Angeles whom I quoted!):

*As to any .. program-note of an analytical nature, I hope that none is necessary, since the intention of Mass is to communicate as directly and universally as I can a reaffirmation of faith.*

So I hope that if Bernstein could be with us this morning, he might come and look at us and find us spiritually climbing up... and then down Jacob's Ladder, convinced of the Good News of God's reign that we see in word and sacrament. And that he might then say to us, as he said to my wife and her fellow students all those years ago: "You angels. You..... angels."

