

LITTLE S. MARY'S, CAMBRIDGE

*September 2023: No. 615*

# NEWSLETTER



## Notable dates in September

Friday 8<sup>th</sup> September

**Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, also Accession Day**

12.30pm Low Mass

7pm Sung Mass *followed by refreshments*

Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> September

**Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust Ride and Stride**

*Speak to Jo Wibberley for more information on how you can donate or participate.*

Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> September

**Monthly Healing Mass**

10am. Including the laying-on of hands and anointing with the oil of the sick.

Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> September

**Holy Cross Day**

7.45am Low Mass

7pm Sung Mass *followed by refreshments*

Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> September

**Feast of S. Matthew the Apostle**

7.45am Low Mass

7pm Sung Mass *followed by refreshments*

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> September

**Harvest Festival**

8am Low Mass

10.30am High Mass

6pm Evensong and Benediction

Friday 29<sup>th</sup> September

**Feast of S. Michael and All Angels (Michaelmas)**

12:.0pm Low Mass

7pm Sung Mass *followed by refreshments*

## From the Assistant Curate

S. Aidan 2023

Dear brothers and sisters,

I have now been with you as Assistant Curate for about a month, and what a wonderful and varied month it has been! I am very grateful to all of you for the warm welcome I have received, and look forward to getting to know those of you with whom I haven't quite caught up yet. Of course, as many of you know, I am not strictly speaking "new" to Little Saint Mary's, having first walked through the doors on Michaelmas 2013 (actually, it was a Sunday, so the Feast was transferred to the following day). It has been wonderful to "come home" after my time away. This also means that, despite my being your new curate, Michaelmas this year will be my tenth anniversary in the parish!

Liturgically this a very rich month, with a feast day in every week. Dates and times of Masses for these are listed above, and I look forward to celebrating Our Lady's birthday with you all on Friday 8<sup>th</sup>. As it happens, that is also Accession Day – meaning the anniversary of His Majesty's accession to the throne. This is, of course, a happy occasion, but it is also, naturally, the anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II's death. But for these events to coincide together – the end of an era, the beginning of a new one – with the birth of Queen of Heaven, is entirely appropriate.

I also wish to thank everybody for bearing with me as I have been let loose on the church while the Vicar enjoys a well-deserved rest. However much we clergy may sometimes end up being in the limelight, a parish church is a community that cannot keep going for long without a whole host of people – nearly all of them volunteers – who share the various spiritual (and practical) gifts with which they have been blessed. Thank you to all who have assisted me as I learn the ropes, and who have simply carried on doing what they do to contribute to the common life of Little Saint Mary's. And, of course, if you're reading this and feeling that you would like to contribute something new, do speak to me or Fr Robert.

Yours ever in Christ,  
Fr Ed.

# After the organ voluntary

*Andrew Reid writes:*

Gradually, over several years, and across parts of the Church of England served by choirs and organs, I have noticed a change at the end of the service. The conclusion of the organ voluntary is marked by applause. At LSM this has become the practice on Sunday mornings, though interestingly not after Benediction, nor after Mass on weekday evenings. Before going any further, I should say two things. Firstly, I would like to express to you, the congregation of LSM, my heartfelt appreciation of your warm welcome since my appointment as Director of Music. I am encouraged that you feel my ministry is beneficial, and indeed that many of you choose to stay to hear the organ voluntary. And I believe that my colleagues would feel the same. Nothing of what I am about to say, therefore, should be taken as reproof. Indeed, you should only continue to read this article if you feel able to accept that premiss! The second thing to say is that the whole idea of writing anything of this nature in an academic community far more knowledgeable than me fills me with dread! But here goes.

St Paul encouraged the early Christians to build one another up in the Lord, and I am sure that words and actions of encouragement and affirmation formed part of that process. In 1 Corinthians 12 he famously expounded on the idea that the Church is a body with many members, each with a vital part to play. It therefore seems critical to me that appreciation be given to all, especially the “less presentable parts”, here perhaps interpreted as those who serve in more hidden ways. Rarely in churches are the ministries of those who clean and mend, lead intercessions, serve, provide, welcome, help those in distress, or undertake administration adequately recognised. Yet without their ministries our church would not thrive.

In comparison to these, the ministry of music by its very nature can easily draw disproportionate attention to its presence. Musicians have to be careful how they tread this line. I am embarrassed when I walk into some cathedrals to find the musicians eulogised, for instance in the intercessions. By all means, let’s pray among others for church musicians, who need every ounce of spiritual help. But there is a world of difference between encouraging someone’s ministry and setting it up as an idol. I’m grateful

not to find that situation at LSM.

I sense that music has long had two fundamental roles to play in society (albeit alongside other roles latterly): within worship; and as part of the social fabric binding our communities. It may metaphorically be salient to think of the two roles as “vertical” (God-directed) and “horizontal” (human-directed) in order to distinguish their primary purposes. As musicians have sought to develop and embellish the functional, art or craft has developed within each field.

One issue for music in worship, particularly in recent times, has been how to distinguish itself from “performance” culture, and with it the “cult of the performer” – the focus turned in on the communicator rather than what is communicated and the message it conveys (below I suggest why this is problematic in a liturgical context). Indeed, many Christians have a problem with the word “performance” when related to worship, though I note that our lexicon is unhelpfully limited in this regard.

At the same time, over many centuries music in worship has become indebted, and inextricably linked, to elements of performance culture. Within its art forms it has moved from the simple recitation of text and grandeur of texture towards *Affekt* – the ability to move the emotions. This in practice likely implies the presence of a human listener or receiver to be so moved, though we can also shape our own understanding and spiritual receptiveness when we “sing and make music to the Lord”. A confusion in how far the types of liturgical music we hear are vertical and how far horizontal is therefore somewhat inherent in our musical language.

Our response to the music we hear in worship is in part determined by our understanding of its role. In concerts this is clearer: we believe that musicians perform for us, the listener. Paying for a ticket reinforces the contract. Our natural response is to applaud and thus thank the performer or actor who goes beyond the notes and persuasively interprets the work of the composer or author, revealing to us the meaning of its prophecy. In liturgical settings, however, we don’t applaud those who reveal the word of God even though we value their revelation: when was the last time we clapped a sermon?

Liturgy is seamless, and about the whole rather than the individual. It is given to help us worship and adore God, to nourish us, and to free us to go out and live our lives in the service of the Gospel. In liturgical celebrations, individual ministries form part of the whole, fellow ministers striving together to build up the community of faith in accordance with their gifts. It matters that those gifts are directed outwards, not to celebrate the individual. While we do show our appreciation of individuals in church occasionally, it is usually outside the liturgy proper, such as during the notices or a commissioning.

But returning to our topic, some may ask whether the organ voluntary is a liturgical act at all? After all, it occurs after the Dismissal. Before the Reformation organ music was played during the liturgy: on feasts, the organ would play alternate verses of a hymn, Mass ordinary or Magnificat in dialogue with the singers. This is not unlike the occasional improvisation between hymn verses today. At the Reformation, while the organ solo found a liturgical role in the Lutheran Church in the prelude of Chorales, it was banned in other Protestant churches. In Anglican cathedrals, churches and chapels where musicians were retained at the Elizabethan Settlement, a compromise appears to have taken decades to reach, with organ music eventually finding a home on the margins of the liturgy: organists could deploy their skills, but after the main order of worship, as defined in the Prayer Book, had been completed. Organ music, to many a Papist relic, could not be trusted to perform a ceremonial role, nor to give prophetic utterance within a Biblical, understanding-based liturgy. Yet at the same time nor could the Church quite bring itself to deny that the Holy Spirit might still speak through the mystery and gift of musical creativity.

Today some churches proclaim the organ voluntary to be an integral part of the liturgy and expect their congregations to stay to hear it. I'm not keen on this approach. Once music becomes the forced focus rather than the vessel, I worry that it can easily slip into a culture of education or entertainment, which applause can reinforce. Reading Samuel Pepys' post-Restoration accounts of anthems as a form of entertainment is instructive in this regard; as is the disagreement in mid to late 19th-century Paris between Catholic priests and musicians over whether there should be a distinction between the style of music suitable for the liturgy and the opera house! In parentheses, I note that acts of worship presently benefit from the waiving of fees for "performing" other people's musical compositions: if society

allows this distinction, the Church might be wise not to muddy the waters!

If it is not to educate or entertain, is the role of the organ voluntary a horizontal one, to speak to the congregation on a spiritual plane? Or is it to provide a vertical offering, in line with many other liturgical actions? The same conundrum applies in church art and architecture, where the sacrificial fruits and cost of creativity are put at the service of God, yet naturally also shape and serve the worshipper's experience. If the creativity of the Holy Spirit demands expression, where is it to be directed?

Even if we intended a purely vertical offering, we would surely not deny the possibility that the Spirit may speak to fellow worshippers in forms such as inspiration, prophecy or healing. I am delighted if what I play resonates with others and gives grounds for thanksgiving, challenge, comfort or reflection: in other words, if it helps to build up the body of Christ. If my offering were not intended vertically – if that were not my motivation – might it still not be of value for those worshipping? Might I (or it) still not in this way become, even unintended, a vessel of the same Spirit? Who can delimit the sphere of the Holy Spirit's activity?

In concluding, I would like unequivocally to thank you for your warmth and appreciation over the past three months. Importantly, however, this piece is not about what I would personally prefer as a response to my own playing of the organ voluntary, but seeking to understand what is appropriate to the moment, and why. I find it difficult when I attend a service elsewhere and everyone else claps: am I a killjoy for not doing so? It's not that I have not found value in the musical offering, but rather a question of purpose, and therefore liturgical propriety.

While I make the case against applauding organ voluntaries, I would ask you to be gracious to those who haven't read this, or who profoundly disagree. I hope that the latter, and indeed anyone with a fresh perspective, will share it with me in the weeks ahead: the LSM congregation will surely provide interesting, theological and thought-provoking responses on such an issue! Please view this article as a work in progress: if I ever write elsewhere on the subject, it will be far better informed through your insights. And if my playing, and that of colleagues, speaks to you in any helpful way, please do continue to stay for the organ voluntary!

# Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust

*Jo Wibberley writes:*

The main fundraising initiative is the sponsored Ride and Stride held on the second Saturday of September each year, when participants are invited to cycle, walk or ride horses to as many churches as possible. This is the fortieth anniversary year of the Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust, and they look forward to raising a record total. If you are unable to ride or stride yourself, your sponsorship will be very welcome to those who do. All participants are invited to nominate their local church to receive 50% of the funds they raise so LSM will benefit as well.

As church life gathers pace again after Covid, requests for help from the Trust with maintenance and repair projects have grown sharply. Please help them to raise the funds to help these churches. The following are a few examples of grants given for repair and restoration.

## **Great Paxton, Holy Trinity**

*Grant awarded: £3,000*

Great Paxton now has a new stone floor in the south aisle after discovering that the old suspended timber floor was unsafe. This also involved moving the pipe organ from the south aisle to the north aisle and sitting it on a new stone plinth. The opportunity was also taken to deal with other damp issues around the church.



## **Wood Ditton, St Mary the Virgin**

*Grant £5,000 and loan £20,000 for buttress and window repairs.*



## **Wisbech, St Peter & St Paul**

*Grant awarded: £5,000 and £20,000 loan*

In support of a major project, totalling over £500,000 for this early 12<sup>th</sup>-century church which included urgent major roof repairs, extensive structural repair to the vestry windows and surrounding stonework and improved drainage to ameliorate damp problems.

## **Keyston, St John the Baptist**

*Grant awarded: £1,000 for the cadaver sculpture pictured on its former stand.*



The Keyston carved cadaver is a unique piece of sculpture of at least national importance. Made of wood and carved from a single trunk, the sculpted wood was radio-carbon dated to 1400, likely carved when green. It is thought to be William Stuckley (d.1408). It is unlikely

that anyone but the man commemorated would commission such an item.

The sculpture was damaged by old woodworm and recent pencil graffiti. There was little evidence of damage from bats, largely owing to its being covered to protect it from their urine and excrement. It was located on the north side of the west wall, which is quite a damp area, and that may have exacerbated some of the damage.

The sculpture was moved to the chancel area, near the altar, as this area is less damp and there is less evidence of bat activity. It was given a new stand and a Perspex cover to protect it from any human damage such as the graffiti, but also from bat damage.

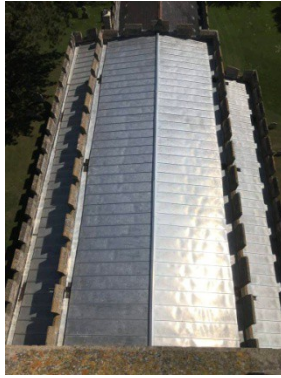
The cost of the cleaning was met by CHCT whilst the cost of the stand and cover was met by a Partnership between Natural England, the C of E and the Bat Conservation Trust.

## **Kingston, All Saints & St Andrew**

*Grant awarded: £3,000 grant and £20,000 loan*

## Whaddon, St Mary

*Grant awarded: £4,000 in September 2020 and subsequent loan of £20,000 in March 2021*



Two years after the discovery that thieves had stripped the entire roof of its lead, this 14th-century Grade I listed church is once again watertight under a new roof.

Rather than replace the lead roof, the Parochial Church Council decided to install a new roof of terne-coated stainless steel that would be less vulnerable to future theft. Obtaining permission for the change in roofing material and fundraising to cover the cost of the works took 18 months.



# Calendar for September

FRI	1 <sup>st</sup>	<i>S. Giles, hermit</i>
SAT	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<i>Martyrs of Papua New Guinea</i>
SUN	3 <sup>rd</sup>	<b>THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY</b>
MON	4 <sup>th</sup>	<i>S. Birinus, bishop</i>
TUE	5 <sup>th</sup>	
WED	6 <sup>th</sup>	<i>Allen Gardiner, missionary</i>
THU	7 <sup>th</sup>	
FRI	8 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Accession Day</b>
SAT	9 <sup>th</sup>	<i>Charles Fuge Lowder, priest</i>
SUN	10 <sup>th</sup>	<b>FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY</b>
MON	11 <sup>th</sup>	
TUE	12 <sup>th</sup>	
WED	13 <sup>th</sup>	<i>S. John Chrysostom</i>
THU	14 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Holy Cross Day</b>
FRI	15 <sup>th</sup>	<i>S. Cyprian, bishop</i>
SAT	16 <sup>th</sup>	<i>S. Ninian, bishop, Edward Bouverie Pusey</i>
SUN	17 <sup>th</sup>	<b>FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY</b>
MON	18 <sup>th</sup>	
TUE	19 <sup>th</sup>	<i>S. Theodore, archbishop</i>
WED	20 <sup>th</sup>	<i>John Coleridge Patteson, bishop, and companions</i>
THU	21 <sup>st</sup>	<b>Matthew, apostle and evangelist</b>
FRI	22 <sup>nd</sup>	
SAT	23 <sup>rd</sup>	
SUN	24 <sup>th</sup>	<b>HARVEST FESTIVAL</b>
MON	25 <sup>th</sup>	<i>Lancelot Andrewes, bishop, Sergei of Radonezh, teacher</i>
TUE	26 <sup>th</sup>	<i>Wilson Carlile, founder of the Church Army</i>
WED	27 <sup>th</sup>	<i>Vincent de Paul, founder of the Lazarists</i>
THU	28 <sup>th</sup>	
FRI	29 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Michael and All Angels</b>
SAT	30 <sup>th</sup>	<i>S. Jerome, teacher, Ember day</i>

# September Daily Intentions & Anniversaries of death

People living in solitude		1 <sup>st</sup>
The Papua New Guinea Church Partnership		2 <sup>nd</sup>
<b>Our Parish &amp; People</b>	<i>Ernest Cherry, Queenie Windeat</i>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup></b>
Evangelistic renewal in England	<i>Richard Barlow-Poole</i>	4 <sup>th</sup>
An increase in charity	<i>David Mossop</i>	5 <sup>th</sup>
The people of South America		6 <sup>th</sup>
Cleaner air	<i>Ian Leadsham, Kimji Popat</i>	7 <sup>th</sup>
His Majesty the King	<i>Cherry Dainty, HM Queen Elizabeth II</i>	8 <sup>th</sup>
Mission amongst the poorest in society	<i>Helen Kinnier Wilson, Ivan Buchanan</i>	9 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Our Parish &amp; People</b>		<b>10<sup>th</sup></b>
Victims of abuse	<i>Christine Stevenson, Joyce Bird, Joan White</i>	11 <sup>th</sup>
Peace in the Holy Land		12 <sup>th</sup>
Preachers		13 <sup>th</sup>
Self-sacrifice	<i>Lilian Fletcher, Doris White, Patrick Theobald</i>	14 <sup>th</sup>
Christian Unity		15 <sup>th</sup>
The people of Scotland		16 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Our Parish &amp; People</b>	<i>Leslie Norman, Edith Butcher</i>	17 <sup>th</sup>
Biblical scholars and teachers		18 <sup>th</sup>
Wise and compassionate leadership	<i>Rose Linsey-Bird, Hannah Dennett, Geoffrey Smith (priest)</i>	19 <sup>th</sup>
Missionaries	<i>Lily Wythe, Ian Robins</i>	20 <sup>th</sup>
People who work in the finance sector		21 <sup>st</sup>
Church planters		22 <sup>nd</sup>
Wildlife conservationists	<i>Michael Rowett</i>	23 <sup>rd</sup>
<b>Our Parish &amp; People</b>	<i>Ena Matheson, Nellie Harnwell, Ian Thompson (priest), Stephen Sykes (bishop)</i>	<b>24<sup>th</sup></b>
Theologians	<i>Joan Wardill</i>	25 <sup>th</sup>
The Church Army	<i>Richard Bainbridge, Ian Paton</i>	26 <sup>th</sup>
The Lazarists	<i>Rees Lloyd-Jones</i>	27 <sup>th</sup>
Philanthropy		28 <sup>th</sup>
Angelic protection	<i>Derek Gibbons</i>	29 <sup>th</sup>
Translators		30 <sup>th</sup>

# The Garden

*Jeremy Musson writes:*

Look out for the winter cyclamen (pictured below). Volunteers continue to try and manage the churchyard garden, and are hopeful that the work and some of new plantings that went in in 2023 will be rewarded in 2024 (repeated thanks to all the members of the congregation who made generous donations towards this). A list of preferred plants for the New Yew Bed, the Old Yew Bed and the Little St Mary's Border was supplied by our gardens adviser in the spring (including *Geranium sylvaticum* 'Mayflower', *Geranium* 'Orion', *Phlox paniculata* 'Uspek', *Salvia nemerosa* 'Ostfriesland' and *Anemone x hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert', which were all planted and some have done well). If anyone in the congregation would like to see this list and offer additional plants from this list to help fill spaces where weeds are regularly dug out, they would be very welcome. There are plans to introduce another Magnolia in the autumn, and a discreet bird bath where some water can serve the birds and insects. The myrtle bush which was damaged by frost has started to grow again. A volunteer interested in recording all the inscriptions and tombs and headstones in the churchyard garden is also being sought. If anyone living nearby has access to a small lawnmower, and might be prepared to mow the new grass glade in the middle of the garden on a regular basis, we would be pleased to hear from you. For the list or interest in volunteering, please either contact Mark in the office, or me [jeremy@jeremymusson.com](mailto:jeremy@jeremymusson.com)



# A meditation for Michaelmas

*Charles Moseley writes:*

On 29th September we celebrate the feast of St Michael and all Angels. That feast, like Lady Day, when the Archangel Gabriel came with terrifying news to Our Lady, is one of the legal Quarter Days. For centuries it was a time for hiring and being hired, for entering into or leaving a tenancy, and so on (our tax year still begins and ends on Old Lady Day). It was the end of the agricultural year, when the harvest was in and the beasts were fattened, and when the surplus ones would soon need to be killed and salted down for the dark, hungry months ahead.

And it is at this time, when the year turns towards the dark, that the Church reminds us of the ministry of the Angels. But how often do we think seriously about angels? And if we do, *what* are they? The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* says, “In general Catholic Christianity teaches the existence of angels and enjoins a cult similar to that given to the saints.” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992, paragraph 328) says that the existence of the spiritual, non-corporeal beings that Scripture calls angels is “a truth of faith and the life of the Church benefits from the mysterious and powerful help of the angels. All human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession. And Christ is their centre, by whom and through whom they were created for Him.” The Church of England believes in angels, officially. Cranmer’s collect for this feast day takes them for granted: “O everlasting God, who hast ordained and constituted the services of angels and men in a wonderful order: Mercifully grant that, as Thy holy angels alway do Thee service in heaven, so by Thine appointment they may succour and defend us on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (He took the basis for that prayer from a 14th-century primer, and assumes, as his predecessor would have done, that most people would have some sort of working idea of what they were and what they did. Google tells me that 66% of modern Americans “believe” in angels – one of those statistics so broad-brush that it is meaningless.

How often do we – can we - talk about angels nowadays, in our crassly materialist culture, when so readily our default position is that if something can’t be quantified or valued it doesn’t exist? What do most Church members think privately? Any attempt to conceptualise angels can so often

easily lose itself in the androgynous, often rather soppy, figures in Victorian stained glass with anatomically improbable wings – nice, but hardly relevant, certainly not so awesome that you would involuntarily kneel in fear and trembling.

But first, a bit of historical background – you guessed that was coming, did you not? – so that we can set our mental coordinates. All the world’s great religions posit the existence of an unseen – call it spiritual – dimension to our world, and of beings who interact for good or ill with humans. The Hebrew Scriptures describe angels appearing to the Patriarchs, to Moses, Joshua and several other people – Hagar (Genesis 16), Lot (Genesis 19) and Jacob (Genesis 28 and 31). One bars the way to Balaam in Numbers 22. Isaiah 63 speaks of the “angel of the presence”. They heal from impurity (Isaiah 6, Zechariah 3); they intercede for us (Zechariah 1); they are warriors and protect all that is good (Daniel 10 & 12); they are messengers and teachers, and Psalm 91 assures us that “He will give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.” The Talmud names four - Michael, Gabriel, Uriel and Raphael - who later would be called archangels. We can be sure that Our Lord and His disciples would have shared this tradition, and it seamlessly continues into the Church. The Gospels make no bones about it: it was angels who brought tidings to Zacharias, to Mary, and reassurance and warning to Joseph. Two angels appear to the disciples after the Ascension, and so on. In Acts 12 Peter is freed from prison by an angel.

By the time of Cranmer, who was ordained as priest well before the Church in England became officially Protestant, ideas about angels and their functions had been greatly developed. They are represented in many surviving medieval buildings and in many paintings, usually with symbols of what sort or rank of angel they are. For the hugely influential, probably 5th-century *Celestial Hierarchies* (a highly neo-Platonic work, attributed wrongly to Dionysius the Areopagite, whom St Paul supposedly knew) had divided them into Nine Orders, and these were recognised by Pope Gregory the Great. The Assumption of the Virgin (1475-76) by Botticini in the National Gallery, London, shows the Orders, each with its different characteristics. So does Window 36 (St Apollinaire) at Chartres Cathedral (13th century), and there is a modern West Window at St Michael and All Angels, Somerton, through which the dazzling light of the setting sun shines, showing them in what glory our little minds can imagine. The

highest orders, Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones, are entirely God-turned, on fire with the love of God – which is why in medieval art their faces are often painted red. The next triad, Dominations, Virtues and Powers, look after features of the created universe, governing nature, and with power over evil forces. Finally, the Principalities, Archangels and Angels are the ones who engage with human affairs. Cranmer’s word “order” implies that fundamental concept in antique and medieval thinking about society, the world, creation itself: Hierarchy. That is not just authority, but a willing service of mutual duty and love upwards and downwards, and it emphatically states that everything from the meanest particle to the greatest angel has a unique place in God’s purpose and love. Humans, being placed a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8.5), thus quite properly have to do only with the squaddies and NCOs of the Heavenly Host.

So much for tradition and theory. It is of course unprovable, and like all statements that are not mathematically true it must contain an unquantifiable amount of error. But it is axiomatic that an argument can only discuss what is implicit in its premisses; just so our senses can only perceive what senses *can* perceive and there may be – probably is - much else really going on in modes that our senses *cannot* know. That fine scientist (and no supernaturalist) John Burdon Sanderson Haldane said in the 1930s, “It looks as if the Universe is queerer than we think. It may be queerer than we *can* think.” He was exactly right, as we are finding almost daily. Even in the material world we are constantly finding that out in quantum physics and astrophysics, in epigenetics and plant biology, and the extraordinary world of fungi and lichens. Thirty years ago nobody would have thought that trees could communicate, even cooperate, through their mycorrhizal networks; that slime moulds and mycelia could make what looks awfully like decisions and choices and remember without the slightest semblance of a brain; that the hyphae of mycelia could communicate by means quite unknown across vast distances. It is truly a world full of wondrous things, where the only certain expectation we can have is of the unexpected - millions of surprises, blessings beforehand, ties of gratefulness, the sound of glory ringing in our ears, without, our shame, within, our consciences. There is nothing more probable in our physics (even as we have them in their constantly self-revising state) than that our material mode of being is not the only one. Indeed, if we as Christians accept the bedrock of our Faith, the Divine Nonsense of the Resurrection, we are committed to just such a world, where all materialist bets are off.



So the existence of beings spiritual – call them what you will – is more than probable. Suppose they *really do* interact with us, suppose they really *are* messengers and ministers, as their Greek name suggests, of God Himself. What then? What sort of world are we living in? What form might their action and interaction take? John Donne, writing around 1600 to his beloved Anne, takes their appearance so matter of factly, as if there were no argument:

“So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame  
Angels affect us oft, and worshipp'd be ...  
An angel, face, and wings  
Of air, not pure as it, yet pure, doth wear.”

“Oft”, indeed? Perhaps we do entertain angels unawares, as Hebrews 13.2 suggests: “Forget not to show love unto strangers: for thereby some have *entertained angels unawares.*” Have we not all met – not often, but unforgettably - those people into whose eyes, for one brief moment, you look and share an utter intimacy, before whom one’s being is laid bare, and then they are gone we know not whither, those ordinary people – or not so ordinary. The experience can be life-changing. Then the time that accident so nearly happened, and in an instant, a split second, you seem to be aware of some intervention that stopped its awfulness? Guardian angels ... well, why not? Then there is the testimony of utterly trustworthy people who, like the disobedient monk who followed St Columba to Sithean Mòr in Iona (a place still, today, held to be strange, uncanny) and saw him “conversing with beings too bright to look at”?

So far, so cheery. But in His Creation God did not create toys but beings with – at whatever level – the freedom to choose not to do His will. It must follow that spiritual beings, created good, must also be free to choose the dark. Even the higher beings must surely be able to choose wrong, else their loving service would be meaningless, worth precisely nothing. We have no idea what sort of sins an angel might commit, but the tradition of the fallen, disobedient, angels is very ancient. Its truth is unprovable, again; but given both the existence of spiritual beings and their freedom it is entirely possible. So we have the tradition of Satan and all his angels, of the Archangel Michael and his host in constant battle against the Fallen Angels who seek to foul Creation and bend it to their will. And it follows that just as we may posit helper angels, so we can posit the other sort. And just as the helpers may be disguised, so too the rotters will not look like rotters,

but like smiling prosperous people in smart suits, with a big smile, a sense of humour and lots of promises of what you think is your heart's desire. No names, no packdrill ... but some of us do choose the dark. It is one of the greatest ironies that evil is powerless unless it can counterfeit, for the time being, the good. There is an old saying that the Devil can appear in the likeness of an angel of light, and a whole early modern dramatic tradition was hung on that. Tempters are not tempters if they are not deeply attractive. St Paul is quite clear, as Cranmer was, about the struggle the Christian must face: Ephesians 6. [12]: "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

So let us indeed, this Michaelmas, give thanks for the web, the wonderful order, of being that includes the stars, and the slime moulds, and the angels, and us, and the electrons singing in their orbits round the nucleus. The distinction between life and non-life is becoming harder and harder to draw, almost yearly; the distinction between the material and the immaterial seems to be a mere matter of wavelength. The holy is all around, and so it is unnoticed. The distinction is not between sacred and secular, only between sacred and desecrated. So praise Him: for He looked on all He had made, and saw that it was good.

But His creatures had the freedom to spoil it.

