

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 1, 2023 – The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's reading from the letter of Paul to the Philippians contains an important section, introduced with the words, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." The six verses which follow (6-11) are known as The Christ-Hymn. It is likely that this hymn was written earlier than the letter and by someone other than Paul. The hymn may have been recited in early liturgies. Paul is using the hymn in his letter to the church in Philippi to substantiate his plea that church members embrace humility, in imitation of Christ.

The first half of the Christ-Hymn explains that the divine Christ did not use his exalted state for selfish ends, but graciously put aside his position of equality with God to become incarnate, a human being subject to death. In his manner of life, he humbled himself for service to others, and he was obedient to God's will to the point of accepting crucifixion. The second half of the Christ-Hymn describes God's response. God exalted Christ because of his humility, giving him the divine name above every other name and the lordship of the universe, to vindicate the one who had placed himself so totally at God's will.

Paul exhorts the followers of Jesus to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, ... [and to] look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." This is what Christ had done, and the followers of Christ are meant to be of the same mind as Christ. To have the mind of Christ is a very tall order, perhaps best viewed as a guide for our lives rather than as a goal we can attain. Paul contrasts selfish ambition, conceit, exploitation of status, and overarching concern with one's own needs with the humility, willingness to serve others and to obey God's will that we have seen in Jesus Christ. We can look at ourselves and take some measure of the direction of our lives using Paul's ideas.

We live in a culture that encourages and rewards selfish ambition, conceit, exploitation, and a "me first" attitude. For those of us who take the Bible's main ideas seriously, we see that the prophets of God recorded in the Old Testament and in the New Testament – including Jesus – condemn these traits and behaviors repeatedly. One must leave the covers of the Bible closed to avoid encountering truly frightening words of condemnation for people who exploit the poor and do not help those in need, for people who are self-righteous before God and other human beings, for people whose hearts are stone and not flesh.

Many of us are convinced that the Bible's main ideas are right, and we seek to live as Jesus taught us to live, loving our neighbors as ourselves, serving the needy, with gratitude to God and with humility. We try to live this way in the church, in our families, and in our communities. Obedience to God and concern for the needs of others must be put into practice. The short parable in our lesson from the Gospel

according to Matthew puts this very clearly. Which son did the will of his father –the one who said he wouldn't work in the vineyard but did or the one who said he would work but didn't? Certainly, the one who obeyed his father's command and actually worked was the one who did the will of his father. Empty promises do not equal obedience.

Now I would like to turn to a topic we don't often consider – angels. This past Friday, September 29th was the day in the church calendar when we celebrate St. Michael and All Angels. So, I thought it would be fitting to explore the topic of angels this week.

First of all, what is an angel? The English word "angel" comes from the Greek word "*angelos*" and means, literally, a messenger; in religious contexts, a messenger from God. It is commonly believed that human beings can be messengers of God to one another. You may have had the experience of a person conveying a truth from God to you in some way. Some people believe that non-human creatures such as animals can also be God's messengers to human beings. Again, you may have had such an experience. But this morning we are talking about spiritual creatures who serve as God's messengers or interact on God's behalf with humans in other healthful, protective ways.

What does an angel look like? We are most familiar with representations of angels who look like human beings with wings and often a halo. You or your children may have dressed up as angels for a Christmas pageant in white robes with wings and a halo, hopefully well attached! In the Old Testament book of Genesis, we find the story of Abraham who offered hospitality to three men who appeared at the door of his tent. It turns out these were not men but angels who looked like men; apparently, they did not have wings or halos. Angels were also viewed in the Old Testament as fire. Consider the burning bush who conveyed God's message to Moses. I have seen a painting of the Annunciation in which the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary in the form of a column of bright light. In whatever way they appear, it is generally agreed that angels do not actually have bodies like ours; they are heavenly not earthly.

Two of the angels named in the Bible are Michael and Gabriel. In Jewish and Christian tradition Michael is the chief of the archangels. In the book of Revelation we find a description of a war in heaven in which Michael and his angels fought against and defeated the dragon – the Devil – and his angels. Michael is the head of the heavenly host which is the spiritual army of God. He is typically portrayed in military uniform with sword unsheathed, a dragon sometimes under his foot. We are most familiar with Gabriel, of course, because he announced the coming birth of John the Baptist to his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and especially because he announced the coming birth of Jesus to Mary.

Many Christians believe that we have guardian angels. This belief comes directly from words of Jesus recorded in the 18th chapter of Matthew's Gospel (18:1-10). When his disciples asked Jesus who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus called a child to them and said, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the

kingdom of heaven.” Jesus went on to say, “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.” In Jewish tradition angels were viewed as guardians of human beings. So, though it is not absolutely clear from the words of Jesus that each person has one particular angel, that is how the saying became most commonly interpreted. We may find it difficult or impossible to believe that God, the creator of the entire Cosmos, is concerned with the particulars of the life of every human being. But we may believe that an angel, one of a vast host of God’s heavenly creatures, keeps watch and helps us during our lives. We may have experienced an angel, by sight or sound or touch or understanding. We may have felt the protection of an angel or come to realize that “someone” has been watching over us.

One final word about angels. The Archangel Michael is believed by some to deliver peace to God’s people at the end of their lives. Some people believe that the final task of a person’s guardian angel is to bring the person home to God at death. Certainly, people near death have reported seeing visions of angels. If you have been with a good and faithful man or woman as they leave this world, you may know by experience what grace and peace, what presence of God surrounds that person at the end.

Many prayers in word and song refer to angels at the time of death. I recently re-discovered a 19th century American Gospel song called “Angel Band” (sung by Anonymous 4 on their disc “American Angels”; text: Jefferson Haskell; tune: William Batchelder Bradbury). These are the words of the final verse and refrain:

I’ve almost gained my heav’nly home;
My spirit loudly sings;
The holy ones, behold they come!
I hear the noise of wings.

O come, angel band,
Come and around me stand;
O bear me away on your snowy wings,
To my immortal home,
O bear me away on your snowy wings,
To my immortal home.

Surely God’s angels have been with the souls of the good men we have lost in the past few months – Kit, Phil, Denny, and Dan – as they have gone home to God. And let us pray that, as Shakespeare wrote, flights of angels may sing us to our rest, by the mercy of God. Amen.