

Matt's Message for the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, 29th September
"The Purple Aster, Jacob's Ladder, and Ultimate Reality"



*"Michaelmas Daisies, among dead weeds,
Bloom for St. Michael's valiant deeds"*

I've never planted a flower garden, but wildflowers I absolutely love. I much prefer flowers that bloom on their own without me doing any work. Around this time of the year, all the wildflowers are gone or fading away. Lilac and Orange Day Lilies, Apple and Crabapple blossoms are a distant memory. The Wild Carrot or Queen Anne's Lace, that has been standing tall and proud by the roadside since early July, is finally closing and turning brown. Some Chicory remains but not very much. Even the Goldenrod is beginning to lose its bright yellow and turn to brown. Some of them are actually going to seed right now.

But one wildflower is at its peak: the Purple Aster. I'm sure you've noticed it, as they seem to be increasing in number in the past couple of years. You've gotta love this guy: the late bloomer! This year, I saw the first one on the last day of August. All summer, he bides his time, waiting. All the wildflowers of summer bloom and put on their colourful show while he just watches and waits. Then when they're all either gone or fading, he explodes all over the landscape in a brilliant purple. The trees look down and see him and know that it's time for them to start changing colour. When the Purple Asters are standing tall among the few remaining Goldenrod and blue Chicory and the Sugar Maples overhead are bright yellow and red and cool breezes are blowing and the sun is bright but not too hot, almost every one agrees: fall is actually better than summer.



I don't want to enter into too much controversy in these articles, but the feeling around my house is that, yes, fall is actually a better season than summer. Just putting that out there.

Fall has an ancient name related to the liturgy of the Church: *Michaelmas*. This means, the Mass of St. Michael, because the celebration of Michael and All Angels has always happened at the end of September. Apparently the early Church started this practice sometime during the 400s AD. When I was studying history in Scotland, they were all calling the Fall Term, the Michaelmas Term. I didn't know what they were talking about. Thanks to Wikipedia, I totally get it now!

I'm writing this on the first day of Fall or the "Autumnal Equinox". It's a big day for us in our solar system because we've all made it – together as a planet – a quarter of the way around the sun since Midsummer Day, June 20th/21st. At the Equinox (or "equal-night"), the day and the night are approximately the same length. The celebration of Michael and the Angels is always just after this important moment in the earth's year, so the two days have always been associated with each other.

Michaelmas was the time when the ancient Irish Church would do some prayers and liturgies down by the shore of the sea because it was time to stop fishing for the winter and thank God for the fish that had been caught during the summer weather.



In Ireland and Britain, they also had a different name for the Purple Aster: the Michaelmas Daisy. Maybe this is still what it's called over there - I'm not sure - but I've never heard it called that before. But it's a great name. I love it when things connect the Church year to nature. The re-awakening earth is perfect for Easter. The long, cozy, cold nights are perfect for Christmastime. Now that I've learned the name of the Michaelmas Daisy, when I see it blooming in the midst of all the dying flowers and leaves, I can be reminded of the angels and the great eternal triumph of good over evil. (See the Book of Revelation Chapter 12, verses 7 to 12 for the story of Michael defeating Satan and the bad angels and kicking them out of heaven.) We see evil winning in so many ways all around us. Food and homes are becoming unaffordable for most people and therefore homelessness and hunger are rising at a shocking rate all across our great nation. Police tell us that violent hate crimes are actually rising in Canada. We do what we can to fight against the evil and try to make a world of peace and respect. But it's good to see that Michaelmas Daisy, reminding us that in the big picture, good *does* win. Without that assurance, it's hard to keep up hope in the midst of the battle.

This image of Michael defeating the Devil, or "dragon" or "serpent", has been very important to the Church throughout the centuries. Has it been used as a way to justify violence against non-Christians? Yes, absolutely. So we have to make sure we see it on a symbolic level; a symbol of the struggle against the force of evil itself, not a symbol of doing violence to people we disagree with.



That dragon is a symbol of the evil that lurks in every human heart; we all have to struggle in the power of the Holy Spirit to choose what is Good. It's a dragon, not a person. That means that we're not supposed to be battling specific people, but evil behaviours in some people: such as, oh let's just say, extremely profitable bread companies that fix prices so struggling people can't afford groceries.

In the Old Testament reading for Michael and All Angels, Genesis chapter 8, starting at verse 10, we see the image of Jacob's Ladder. In this hugely important biblical episode, Jacob lies down at night in the middle of a long journey. He is a long way away from home and from any human towns or homes. He is in the wild, alone, using a stone as a pillow. In the traditions of the Bible and the Church, this is often when people had close encounters with God and Angels. Far away from all human creations, the person is surrounded by nature, which is God's own creation. All throughout the centuries of the Church – from the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the early Church to the medieval Francis of Assisi to John Wesley's Evangelical revivals of the 1700s – Christians have often left cities and church buildings behind and sought experiences of God in nature.

Lying directly on the earth, with nothing but the endless sky above him, Jacob falls asleep and has a dream. In my opinion, this dream is no less than a glimpse into the heart of God's universe. Jacob sees a ladder, or the word can also be translated as "stairway." I'm sure you've all seen pictures of ancient temples that are made in the shape of stairs going up to one central point. This might be what the Bible intends us to imagine: angels going up

and down stairs of a temple that does not simply end at some high place, but goes all the way up into the sky. If you take a minute to imagine that, it's an amazing image. Or you can picture the traditional image of the ladder with the top end disappearing into the sky. It's a real connection between heaven and earth or between eternity and time or between God and nature/humanity.



This amazing painting was done by an artist named Gadi Dadon. I don't know anything about the painter, but I like this painting because it shows the angels as

mysterious beings of light. Too often, I find, angels are depicted as overly-beautiful humans, which may or may not be accurate.

This connection is what – I think – we’re all seeking. This is what humans have always desired: to live our lives in a way that connects us to something eternal and unchanging and good. In our earthly life, everything’s changing so fast that it’s hard to know what’s what or what it all means. We need a lifeline or a foothold. We need something that roots us in an eternal reality. I should say: maybe not everyone feels this need, but I do.

The ancient Greek philosophers knew that an eternal, good, unchanging being must logically exist, but they could never figure out how the human could connect to that reality. In this world of aggression and wars (and even World Wars), perfect, unchanging goodness is not to be found. Unlike animals, humans feel deep restlessness most of the time. We think if we attain a certain amount of wealth or relationship success or power that this restlessness might disappear, but it’s always there in every human: a yearning towards something.

And as Jacob slept, he was shown that there is a connection to that reality we all desire. Not only that, but he was also shown that there are mysterious beings moving back and forth between our world and the world of unchanging perfection.

It surprises me that the Bible (Old and New Testaments) is so full of angels, but the Church today talks about them hardly at all. I think one of the reasons they’re not often spoken of is their “mysteriousness.” It’s impossible to pin down who they are or what exactly they do. Sometimes, in the Bible, they appear in terrifying glory while sometimes they are mistaken for normal humans. Sometimes they are named, sometimes they are not. Regardless, these strange beings are major players all throughout the Bible and have a long tradition of appearing to people in the history of the Church as well.

In some way, they should be important to us. In our Communion service, we say a prayer that is perhaps central to the whole liturgy: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.” This is the New Testament version (from Revelation 4:8) of the prayer first heard in the Old Testament in Isaiah chapter 6: “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts.” “Hosts” doesn’t mean people having others over for dinner. “Hosts” means “armies”, or specifically “armies of angels.” Thus in this prayer that has always had a central place in the Church’s worship, God is identified specifically as the God who commands angels. As we reach the climax of the Communion prayer, we worship the God who is sending angels into our world.

It seems like we’re not supposed to imagine just a few angels going back and forth from God to earth. Jacob’s Ladder was an endless ladder with angels going up and down it. It sounds like there were a lot there. When the unnamed angel appears to the shepherds to announce Jesus’s birth, there is a “multitude of the heavenly host” there as well. In 2 Kings 6, we see that there is a huge invisible army of angels appearing as horses and chariots of fire surrounding the prophet Elisha. I think we are meant to picture a universe that is full of these mysterious messengers of God. We are meant to think of angels as continually lifting

our world into God, or continually bringing Divinity down into our world. The cosmos of the Bible and of the pre-industrial Church was much more connected to the eternal spiritual reality than today's world. They knew that the earth was full of His glory. Maybe that's why they were not destroying nature back in those days.

But Jacob's Ladder has a deeper meaning as well. It is an image that foreshadows THE connection of connections. In the Gospel reading for Michael and All Angels, Jesus says to a new follower of his: "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." Jesus is telling us, "I AM Jacob's Ladder. I am the Connection. Heaven is opening for you through me. Climb on me. I am the bridge, the ladder. Heaven and earth are no longer separated. The angels are going up and down me. And you can too."

The incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity – God becoming human – broke down that wall between our world and Divinity, for good and for ever. By living in Christ and following the path of love and sacrifice, we enter a whole new reality: a Spirit-filled heaven and earth. The whole cosmos became a different place when God put on physical reality. That lifeline, that foothold, it's now reachable, for all who are reaching out.

Jesus was a wise and kind Jewish teacher. But he is also more than that. He is Ultimate Reality, lifting our universe into eternity and bringing heaven to earth.

Jacob saw that connection in a dream, then woke up. We have that reality with us all the time everywhere. That means that we are free to participate in the ups and downs of our adventurous, human lives on earth AND in the secure, consistent lives of the angels who are eternally on fire with Infinite Love.

Our universe is interesting and meaningful. That connection between heaven and earth isn't just a dream anymore. Jacob's Ladder is everywhere. For you, the first rung might be a purple wildflower growing out of the garbage in a ditch by the highway.

Happy Michaelmas! May you find Jacob's Ladder...