

4th Sunday Advent Year "B"

December 19-20, 2020

Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12,14,16; Romans 16: 25-27; Luke 1:26-38

On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we are privileged to meet Gabriel, one of three Archangels mentioned in the Holy Scriptures. The Catholic teaching on angels is rich and deep, even as there is much confusion about the role that these creatures play both in the Scriptures and in the world. Sadly, angels have become a mere caricature, having little to do with the reality of their existence as described in the Sacred Scriptures.

The witness of Scripture and Tradition with respect to the existence of angels is rock solid, and yet as a simple Google search reveals, the titles published about angels today are largely from the perspective of new age. "Angels and Archangels: A Magician's Guide" or "The Angel Experiment: A 21-day Magical Adventure to Heal Your Life."

Let's clear up some confusion. The Nicene Creed is a good example. We affirm God the Father almighty, "maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible." The 2011 wording change from "seen and unseen" to "visible and invisible" may appear inconsequential. But it's not.

A small child playing the game of "Hide and Seek" may be unseen, yet hardly could be considered to be invisible. The more precise terminology distinguishes us from purely spiritual creatures. We as human beings are bodily, angels are not. They only appear visibly at times as messengers.

Today we meet Gabriel, who first appeared in the Old Testament Book of Daniel, in the 6th century BC. He appears again in today's Gospel. Saint Augustine notes that angel is the name of their office, not of their nature: "If you seek the name of their nature, it is 'spirit'; if you seek the name of their office, it is 'angel': from what they are, 'spirit', from what they do, 'angel.'"¹

¹ St. Augustine, *En. in Ps.* 103,1,15:

Our Catechism notes: “As purely *spiritual* creatures angels have intelligence and will: they are personal and immortal creatures, surpassing in perfection all visible creatures, as the splendor of their glory bears witness.”² The references to intelligence and will are not troublesome. But that angels are *purely spiritual* is so difficult for us to wrap our heads around. Could there be a realm beyond that which we see?

While some deny their very existence, others have gone to the opposite extreme, creating a fantasy world in which mythology intermingles with biblical revelation, creating a lethal mixture of faith and folklore. These spiritual entities are often invoked 'non-religiously' to help in relaxation aimed at better decision-making and control of one's life and career.³

Gabriel appeared Zechariah and foretold the birth of John the Baptist and again to Mary in today's Gospel. Pious tradition holds that he appeared to St. Joseph and the shepherds, and also that it is he who “strengthened” Our Lord in the garden. His name in Hebrew means “strength of God.”

A proper understanding of their nature is crucial, lest we think that upon death we “become angels,” as I have heard many Catholics say. Yes, Saint Matthew's Gospel teaches: “At the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven.” Notice, he says “like.” This is meant only in that our souls are separated from our bodies for a time, before the final judgment, not that we become another species. We cannot become angels any more than we could become dogs or cats.

We can also stray in seeing our daily life as a constant struggle between good and evil spirits, in which we are helpless before such superior forces. This is not how the Lord would have us live our lives, in fear. The Vatican *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* cautions: “such cosmologies bear little relation to the true Gospel vision of the struggle to overcome the

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 329.

³ (Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian reflection on the “New Age” cf. 2.2.1

Devil, which requires moral commitment, a fundamental option for the Gospel, humility and prayer.”⁴ Recall, each of us has a Guardian Angel, to protect and intercede.

In these final days of Advent, the fundamental pieces are coming together. St. Gabriel is yet one more. We mustn't fail to appreciate his indispensable role in salvation history. From his place in heaven, Saint Gabriel continues to assist us on our journey of faith. Let us continue to prepare a place for the Lord to dwell, by remaining faithful and attentive, just as did St. Joseph. Let us prepare the way. The time is drawing near.

⁴ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments: *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* para. # 217, Vatican City, December 2001