

HOW MANY ANGELS?¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM at Choral Evensong in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on 27 September 2020 in celebration of the Feast of St Michael and All Angels (29 September)

It is quite a privilege to be preaching for my name day. In former times, in some European countries, a person's name day was more important than a birthday. At one's baptism, one would be given a Christian name, which would usually be that of a saint. That saint would then become one's patron.

I would dearly love someone to compose for me a piece like Franz Xavier Süssmayr's *Das Namensfest* where the children sing to their grandfather on his name day. Sadly, I do not have enough grandchildren to make up the choir and the two that I do have live in Boston.

Instead of that I will have to satisfy myself by answering the question, 'How many angels can dance on the point of a needle?' To do this, I will need to create some context and I will start with God. Almost all of our accounts of God arise from analogies with what we already know. In the past, when people thought of an all-powerful deity, they naturally used analogies with earthly kings and their courts.

God was a king and had a court composed of those who did his bidding. Just as humans lived in community, so did God. The dignity of such a God also demanded adequate numbers of retainers. The infinitely glorious God would have infinite numbers of attendants. There was much speculation as to how they were organised, what their hierarchy actually was.²

Some of the great theologians went further than this crude regal analogy. Saint Augustine taught that things exist in opposites, an idea derived from Plato, whose philosophy strongly influenced him. If there are no opposites, it is not possible to identify anything. To understand the dark, we need light. Thus, it is necessary that there be a world of spirits to be the opposite of this world of matter.³ St Thomas Aquinas was concerned to show how the nature of God as pure spirit meant that there had to be created creatures having those same qualities.⁴ Although these speculations may seem rather strange to us, they formed part of serious attempts to understand God and creation.

These same theologians were accused of debating how many angels could balance on the point of a needle. There is no evidence that they ever discussed this question. It is certainly a joke intended to belittle their theology. The question may contain a pun suggesting that the discussion is needless or pointless. But there is an important question lying behind the joke. It is about the nature of spirit and thus the nature of God. Does spirit occupy any space? If the answer is no, then the number of angels on the needle point is infinite. If the answer is yes, then the number is one.

We could think of this as an exercise in virtual reality. In fact, Aquinas said that angels have no 'quantity' with which to fill a space. An angel's quantity is a 'virtual one'. In which case, we who live in the 21st century may find angels easier to accept than those who lived in the 20th

¹ Readings: Psalm 148, Daniel 9:21-26, 10:1-21; Revelation 8:1-6

² Mortimer J Adler, *The Angels and Us*, New York, Collier, 1988, pp. 44-52.

³ St Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XI, Ch 13-18, Penguin, 1986, pp. 444-49.

https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45304/45304-h/45304-h.htm#Page_436

⁴ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1052.htm#article3>

century. From modern computer technology to computer generated graphics on television, movies, and games, we are very familiar with forms of virtual reality that occupy no space.

In 2007, Rowan Williams published a small book, entitled *Tokens of Trust*, in which he discussed Christian beliefs through the medium of the creeds, Apostles and Nicene. In his discussion of the words ‘maker of heaven and earth’, he talked about the importance of angels in Christian teaching. He said:

Odd as it may sound, thinking about these mysterious agents of God’s purpose, who belong to a different order of being, can be at least a powerful symbol for all those dimensions of the universe about which we have no real idea. Round the corner of our vision things are going on in the universe, glorious and wonderful things, of which we know nothing.⁵

Williams notes that, in the Bible, angels are not the sentimental and trivialised beings that we sometimes imagine. He says that they are, on occasion ‘flying serpents burning with flames carrying the chariot of God, filling the temple in Jerusalem with the bellows of adoration, echoing to one another like whales in the ocean.’

He concludes that, whether or not we believe literally in angels,

it’s worth thinking of them as at the very least a sort of shorthand description of everything that is ‘round the corner’ of our perception and understanding in the universe. If we try and rationalise all this away, we miss out on something vital to do with the exuberance and extravagance of the work of God who has made this universe not just as a theatre for you and me to develop our agenda but as an overwhelming abundance of variety and strangeness.

In saying this, Williams echoes Augustine, who suggests that angels ‘can allow us to see all of creation as a complete gift in which we freely participate, rather than as something which we own or can master.’⁶

Therefore with angels and archangels,
and with all the company of heaven,
we proclaim your great and glorious name,
for ever praising you and saying:

Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2007, pp. 51-52

⁶ <https://www.faithandculture.com/home/2019/4/30-all-things-visible-and-invisible>



St Michael and All Angels



St Michael icon hanging in our entranceway