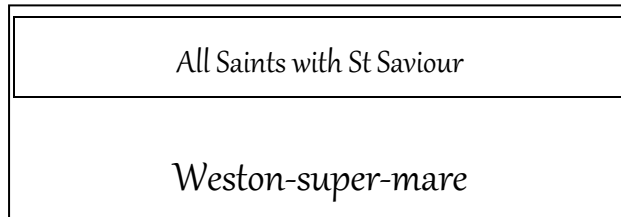




Arms of St Saviour



Arms of All Saints

Dear friends,

I'm writing this on the Feast of Michael and the Holy Angels, Michaelmas, which gives its name to various events, university terms and markets among them.

The Bible is full of stories about angels. Sometimes in these stories we catch a glimpse of heaven, of the angels joyful in the presence of God, full of love for God, worshipping him constantly. Sometimes, we catch a glimpse of heaven being brought to earth, when someone has a dream, as Jacob did, that seemed to open heaven to him, to catch him up to heaven. Sometimes, we learn of holy guardian angels watching over us, as when Jesus said, *'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.'* [Matthew 18: 10] Sometimes, more directly, we see the ways of God, the ways of heaven, explained to men and women, as when the angel Gabriel appears and brings a direct message to Zechariah about Elizabeth his wife bearing a son who will be called John and will be the forerunner of the Messiah. And, most famously of all, we see Gabriel appearing to the young Mary and telling her God would like her to bear his Son.

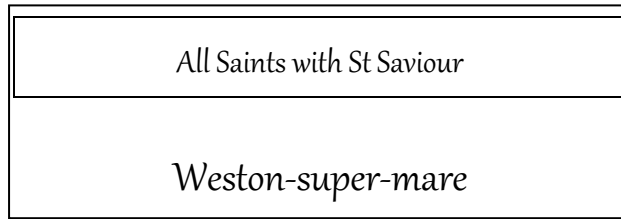
In these accounts, the angels bring heaven to earth and earth to heaven. They connect us on earth to the joy and glory of heaven. They give us an encouraging moment when we can see the reality at the heart of things, when we see it all clearly. They bridge the gap.

But these accounts also offer us a dilemma. We see the angels in Christian iconography. There they are in Renaissance paintings and in stained glass windows: the great and beautiful angels with iridescent wings; the fat little cherubs, flying around in the sky; the mighty seraphs with six wings; the warrior angels with spears and battle-axes, waging war against evil.

The dilemma is this. I dare say that most of us have seen nothing that would remind us of an angel in our daily lives and again most of us are not expecting to see an angel, certainly in this life. Does this mean that there are no angels, or simply that we have failed to see them?



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Sometimes, most of the time, we do not see what is in front of our noses: *You hypocrite, says Jesus, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*

In truth, many of us have as great a problem hearing as we do in seeing. We hear the words of scripture, and we might profess that they are the word of the Lord, that, to put it another way, the Lord is speaking to us through them. We might expect to hear through the human voice of the preacher or of a spiritual counsellor or of a soul friend some word from the Lord. But for most of us most of the time, our spiritual ears are too little attuned to hearing a word direct from the Lord. Would we trust it if we heard it? Do we indeed expect the Lord God almighty to have any direct interest in us personally, to be intimately involved in our lives?

This dilemma is not new. Consider the story of the call of Samuel. Three times he hears the voice of the Lord calling him and runs to Eli, *'Here I am, for you called me.'* Finally Eli understands that it was the Lord who called. The author explains that the *'word of the Lord was rare in those days.'* [1 Samuel 3]

Well, I'm not sure about the angels. What I am sure about is that the scriptures present a God who is longing to communicate with us, who uses every means at his disposal to do so. That's the movement reported in the Scriptures: God towards us, freely, unconditionally inviting us into the circle of his love. And I am convinced of our inability to see and to hear. How different life would be if we expected to meet God around every turn!

With my love and prayers,
Fr Brendan