

Column – Men and angels

I am thinking today of angels as the feast day of St. Michael and All Angels is on Sept. 29. On this day we are reminded, in the words of hymn writer Henry Smart, “Far more o’er thee are watching than human eyes can know.”

With the thought of angels, my mind is immediately turned to my favorite seasonal Christmas movie, “The Bishop’s Wife”. Many of you will know the storyline. An angel, played by Cary Grant, shows up to give guidance to a harried Episcopal bishop bent on building a grand cathedral.

The obsession for the material has caused him to turn away from the more enduring things of the spirit, and it is the task of the angel, whose name is Dudley, to assist the cleric in restoring balance and right order in his life. In the end, this mission is accomplished.

Though produced in 1947, the message of this black-and-white film remains timely. It is none other than that found in our Lord’s injunction in the

Sermon on the Mount: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things [material things] shall be added unto you.”

Angels – Dudley included -- are shadowy, mysterious figures. The Bible speaks of them. Hallmark makes money off them. Christmas trees are often topped with a sentimentalized representation of one. Yet, in fact, we know very little about them.

What we do know from the Bible is that they are spiritual, created beings whom God at times uses to bring His message to men and to assist them in times of need. In this respect, Dudley’s words spoken to the Bishop (played by David Niven) near the beginning of the film seem to be more or less in line with the biblical revelation:

“We are everywhere . . . As you are walking through the streets of the city, you may suddenly look into a strange face. It may be the face of a murderer or the face of an angel.”

Of course, “The Bishop’s Wife” is fiction; yet I have known people – very credible ones – who claimed to have received God’s help at the hand of one of these mysterious beings. I am thinking in particular of a former neighbor who now lives in Tampa.

As she related the story to me, she and her husband arrived at a park to set up for a family gathering. As they were carrying the supplies from their car down to where the picnic was set to be held, her husband, who has Parkinson’s, slipped, fell and bloodied his knees.

She was unable to get him up, and there was no one around to help. So, she found herself breathing a prayer, calling out for God to come to her aid. No sooner had she finished, she found a black arm reaching over her doing what needed to be done. He was wearing what appeared to be jogging apparel. Later (I am truncating the story), she turned to thank him, and he was nowhere to be found.

Was he a man or an angel? It's hard to say. In the end, does it matter? He was sent by God and performed the service of heaven.

God has put in place the service of men and angels in a wonderful order. He watches over you. To Him be the glory!

O EVERLASTING God, who hast ordained and constituted the services of Angels and men in a wonderful order; Mercifully grant that, as thy holy Angels always do thee service in heaven, so, by thy appointment, they may succour and defend us on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(Collect for the St. Michael and all Angels, Book of Common Prayer).

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