

Evensong 14 June 2026 – Luke 11:14-28 – Edoardo Fanfani

One of the beautiful perks of living in Cambridge, for an extrovert like me, is that many of your friends want to come and visit to partake in the beauty of such a historic city. I always give my visiting friends a walk around the historic landmarks, and when I give them a tour of the colleges, I always try to do something different. Recently, I took a visiting friend to the Round Church, one of only four in the country, built by Norman crusaders as a tribute to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

One of my favorite characteristics of it is the fine medieval angels looking down upon us from the roof above the altar; they often go unnoticed. This was a feature of East Anglian churches at the time. The style of English angels is unique within Christian iconography: elongated figures with pointed feet, their necks tilted and extended, their eyes large, and their facial features very distinct in order to convey their perpetual action of praise to God. They were carved or painted to remind the worshipper of the heavenly host continually praising God. For centuries, Christians have lifted up their gaze towards angels to be reminded of the worship that joins earth and heaven together, but only if we pay attention.

That image is especially fitting because of the beautiful words of the hymn: *How shall I sing that majesty which angels do admire?* These words invite us to partake in the worship of heaven itself: the angels standing before God in glory, praising him day and night.

A fifth-century Church Father who bears the simple name of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite believed in a hierarchy of nine spheres, or choirs, of angels. In the highest sphere are the counsellors, known as the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones. Among these, archangels such as Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael hold a place of honour. They are the closest to God and contemplate him continually. Then there are the governors: dominions, virtues, and powers, who administer the heavens. Finally, there are the messengers: principalities, archangels, and angels. They serve as protectors of humankind.

Angels act on behalf of God and allow us to partake in his presence. Dionysius said that angels are, "as it were, heralds of the Divine silence, and project, as it were, luminous lights revealing Him Who is in secret." This was a view later adopted by medieval theologians such as Saint Thomas Aquinas. I have always been fascinated by angels: angels who are hidden from us, much like the ones in the Round Church, whom you have to pay attention to in order to notice.

Yet our Gospel reading this evening presents us with a different picture of the spiritual world, for we hear not of holy angels, but of the fallen ones: the demons, evil powers confronted by our Lord Jesus Christ. These are passages that we as modern Christians might find uncomfortable. We are happier talking about angels than demons, yet it is the powers of hell that are more likely to cause immediate effects in this world. The devil is much happier to reveal himself, unlike the hidden angels whom we have to actively seek in order to gaze upon.

Goodness is more subtle than evil. Goodness requires effort. Evil wins every day in wars, famines, gossip, and in our failure to help our neighbour. As modern Christians, we are not comfortable talking about the root of evil, which, despite our free agency, naturally contributes to much that is bad.

Yet in the ancient world of the New Testament, angels, both good and fallen, belonged to the same spiritual reality. However, demons are not equal and opposite powers to God. Christian tradition has generally seen them as fallen angels, creatures who have turned away from the God who created them for worship. This may be a key to understanding this Gospel. It is a story of authority and allegiance.

Jesus' response is simple: a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, and if Satan is casting out Satan, then that kingdom is already collapsing. Thus Jesus goes further: *if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you*. This is the language of divine power. Jesus is saying that what the people are witnessing is not merely an exorcism; they are seeing the raw power of God breaking into our world.

I believe the language of angels can help us here. The holy angels exist entirely to glorify God; their joy is found in singing his praises, while evil spirits represent the refusal of that service. They are creatures who reject the purpose for which they were made.

Therefore, this passage is not simply about a dramatic encounter with a demon; it is about a choice that every human being must face. Will we orient our lives towards God, like the angels who continually praise him? Or will we turn away from him and seek ourselves instead?

At the end of the Gospel reading, a woman cries out, blessing the mother who bore our Lord Jesus. It sounds like a compliment at first, but Jesus redirects the conversation because true holiness is not found in privilege or in the status given by family connections.

Blessedness is not found in privilege, status, or even family connection: *blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it*. And so blessed are those whose lives are aligned with the will of God. This is the vocation of the angels, but it is also the vocation of the Church.

Whenever we gather for worship, especially at Evensong, we are reminded of that reality. The music, the psalms, the canticles, and the prayers we sing during this beautiful service draw us into the worship of heaven, through the music of the angels, all the way up to God. As the ancient words of the Eucharistic Prayer say: *we join our voices with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven*.

Therefore, the angels above the altar are not there merely as decoration; they point beyond themselves. We have actively to seek them out and be reminded to look at the world as it truly is: a world in which Christ reigns and in which evil does not have the final word; a world in which the stronger one has already overcome the evil one. Let us lift up our eyes and seek those angels and let us join them in their praise of God.

If even the angels admire God's majesty, then our calling is to join them, not only with our lips, but with our lives; hearing the word of God and keeping it. And so we leave God's house tonight remembering the words of our beautiful hymn:

They sing, because thou art their Sun; Lord, send a beam on me; for where heaven is but once begun there alleluias be.