

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Oct 2nd 2013

Memorial of The Holy Guardian Angels

Trusting in God's care--what we call divine Providence--is a basic part of our faith. Whether we think of this care as mediated by guardian angels or saints, or as the direct action of God, it is still a matter of trusting in divine Providence. We all have stories about experiencing rescue from "close calls" in ways that speak much more of a divine care than of good luck. For many of us, the Christian tradition of a personal guardian angel is easier to think about than a special intervention of the Holy Trinity.

To honor divine Providence in the form of the guardian angel tradition, the Church has chosen the one passage in the Gospels where Jesus refers to the personal care of angels, today's reading from the fourth speech of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. What I notice, this time around, is that Jesus' words in this passage do not so much teach about guardian angels as presume their existence as he makes another point: the importance of imitating the heavenly Father's care for "the little ones." Let's read the selection in context.

Jesus' teaching is occasioned by the disciples' worldly preoccupation about status in the community of the kingdom: Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? In Mark and Luke they ask the question in a cruder form: "Who is the greatest [among themselves, apparently]?" (Mark 9:34; Luke 9:46). Jesus responds by placing a child in their midst and telling them that greatness among his followers consists in being as humble as a child, and also in treating such little ones as if they are dealing with Jesus himself. Then Jesus proceeds to speak of dire consequences for those who scandalize such little ones (verses 6-9). This part climaxes with the verse chosen to end today's gospel reading: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father." In context, the reference to the angels is meant to emphasize the relationship of the little ones to the intimate presence and care of the heavenly Father. Lesson: be careful not to despise the very ones who enjoy the special attention of the Father by way of personal angels!

Then Jesus proceeds to illustrate the kind of care that leaders in the community of his disciples should exercise regarding the wandering or lost sheep of the group [the little ones] by presenting the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind and seeks the lost one until he finds it.

So Jesus' teaching here is meant not so much to prompt us to speculate about the angels as to ask ourselves who are the "little ones" in our lives and how we are treating them. Do we see them as the ones the Father is most concerned about and respond to their needs accordingly? Or do we see them not so much as lost as losers who deserve our "benign neglect"? The Father cares how we respond.

Neglect of the needy is, at least in this passage, the one thing that arouses divine wrath.

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