In an episode of the TV drama ‘Doctor Who’ a couple of weeks ago, the Doctor asked his companion Clara this question...

*Doctor:* You know sometimes when you talk to yourself? What if you’re not?
*Clara:* Not what?
*Doctor:* What if it’s not you you’re talking to? Proposition: what if no one is ever alone? What if every single living being has a companion? A silent passenger — a shadow? What if the prickle on the back of your neck is the breath of something close behind you?
*Clara:* How long have you been travelling alone?
*Doctor:* Perhaps I never have.

And then in one of yesterday’s papers, there was an article by the TV presenter Gloria Hunniford, whose daughter Caron Keating died from cancer 10 years ago. Gloria is convinced that Caron has been her guardian angel and that white feathers fall for her to notice and pick up at moments when she is particularly watching over her. “People may think I am deluded, but I know she is there for me, protecting and comforting me whenever I need her most. Like many people, I was once sceptical about the existence of angels,” she writes. “But, as time has passed, I have become completely convinced Caron is an angel whose primary task is to watch out for me. How else to explain some of the extraordinary things that have happened since her death?”

On this our patronal festival, we have the opportunity to reflect on the rather perplexing subject of angels and their largely invisible role in our lives and in our world. What do you think? And why do you think it?

Isolated readings from the book of Revelation have, of course, to be handled with care — and it’s worth reading the whole of chapters 12 and 13 to get a better perspective on what’s going on here. But, even so, the short extract we heard a few minutes ago offers some interesting perspectives for us to consider.

The most obvious one is that angels are not necessarily good. And so the imagery of benign fluffiness with wings and a harp that all too often comes to mind when we think of angels is wrong! We discover here that the dragon against whom Michael and his angels are fighting has angels of his own. The dragon and his angels are defeated, yes, but, in the defiant frustration of their death throes, they continue to be active — and don’t we know it! ‘...the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!’

This is all very graphic and lurid. It’s picture language, yes, of course — but picture language of what exactly? And what is the picture for? Is it a hopelessly incomprehensible distraction? Or is it supposed to help us in some way?

Stepping back a bit, what we see is a picture of power, invisible power, being exercised. There’s an echo here of something we find in chapter 6 of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: ‘For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,’ he writes, ‘but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.’
With this awareness that the strings of our world are somehow being controlled by forces beyond our comprehension and outside our control, it would be tempting just to hide under the table and let them all get on with it.

But no. It’s clear that this is ‘our struggle’, that this enormous cosmic battle is one in which we have a part to play too.

What we’re told about angels in other parts of the Bible suggests that an important part of their role is to help us in this — usually without our being aware of it. The writer of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews puts it like this: ‘Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?’ (Hebrews 1.14). Their job is to prevent anything happening to us which falls outside God’s plan for our lives, an idea we also find in Psalm 91.11-12: ‘For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ And then, from Jesus himself, there’s the suggestion in Matthew 18.10 that each of us, perhaps especially when we are children, has a ‘guardian angel’: ‘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’.

But the thing is that it’s not all down to them. They help us rather than doing it all for us. Listen again to verses 10-11 of Revelation 12: ‘Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.’

Our comrades. People like us. They have conquered him. Much of the fighting in the war between good and evil which engulfs our universe is invisible. But we can’t help but be aware of and involved in the ways in which it breaks through — into our world, into our communities, into our individual lives — for all to see. The one whose ambition is to frustrate God’s purposes for his world, the one described by Jesus as the thief who ‘comes to steal and kill and destroy’, comes to do these things to us.

Which leads me to wonder whether it might help for us to see ourselves, not only as soldiers in the battle, but also as the battleground itself, as it were. We are being fought over in a struggle which is all about answering this question — to whom do we belong? Under whose jurisdiction are we? Whose drum do we march to? Where do our loyalties lie? Who do we place at the centre of our lives? Is it the God who created us, the God who made us for friendship with himself, the God in whose service is perfect freedom, the God in whom our hearts find the rest they seek? Or do we follow the enemy of souls and place ourselves at the centre of our lives — with all the damage, heartache and chaos that stem from pushing God to the sidelines?

So this is where we find the angels — fighting over us. We don’t usually see them. Indeed we’re usually completely unaware of them. Only occasionally do we catch perhaps a glimpse of their activity. Which is fine. We’re not intended to focus on what they’re getting up to. The issue for us is whether we’re helping them or whether we’re making their job harder — the very real impact we ourselves make on the battleground of our souls through the way we live our lives day by day — through the decisions we take and the choices we make.

Let me conclude with a well-known Native American proverb in which an old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life:

‘A fight is going on inside me,’ he said to the boy. ‘It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil — he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good — he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy,
generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you — and inside every other person, too.’

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, ‘Which wolf will win?’ To which the reply was very simple... ‘Which will win? The one you feed.’

So — on this, the festival of Michael and All Angels, here’s the challenge... Make the life of your guardian angel a bit easier. Give them a break. Choose wisely. Live well. Feed the good wolf. For God’s glory. Amen.

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