

Feast of St Michael and all Angels

Revelation 12:7-12, John 1:45-51

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Today we are looking at good and evil, power and glory, and the weapons in our spiritual backpacks. We won't look at all there is to say about those things, and we will touch on some other things along the way, but that is our main concern.

As we celebrate the feast of St Michael and All Angels, I would like to draw together the reading from the Book of Revelation about Michael and the angels, and the Gospel reading about Nathanael.

A few years ago I was on my way to a gathering in the park in Bungendore when the local police car came by. It was one of those hefty 4 wheel drive cars and in the front seat were the local police officer and two angels. They weren't very big but I knew they were angels because they were dressed all in white and had tinsel halos. Sure enough a little later they appeared at the park and sang glory to God, celebrating the birth of Christ.

This is how angels are often portrayed, but in today's reading from the Book of Revelation we get a very different picture of angels. We hear of a great battle between Michael and his angels and the great dragon Satan and his angels. It sounds like a mighty, cataclysmic battle. Now one dictionary definition of cataclysmic is "A violent upheaval that causes great destruction or brings about a fundamental change." I would suggest that in this great battle the result is less about great destruction and more about fundamental change.

Angels

In the scriptures, there were two main reactions by those who met angels. These people either thought initially that the angels were unfamiliar human beings, or else they were terrified by the angelic beings. The first thing an angel might have to say was "Don't be afraid." Only after fear was allayed could a message be given. To meet an angel was an awesome experience, in more ways than one.

Today we will talk about just a few of those angels. Traditionally, there were four archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel. Now names, particularly in the Old Testament, say something about the person or place that bears that name.

The names of these four archangels all end with “el” which means *God*. Angels are messengers of God, and so are very closely associated with God. **Gabriel** means *strength of God* or *God is my strength, my champion*. Gabriel announced some significant deeds of God: he told Zachariah of the coming birth of John the Baptist and he told Mary of the coming birth of Jesus.

Raphael and Uriel are from the apocryphal books of scripture. **Raphael** means *the ointment or the healing of God*. (You have heard Jehovah Rapha, *God of healing*. This is Rapha El, *the healing of God*). There is a story in the Book of Tobit where Raphael helps and heals as an answer to prayer. **Uriel** means *angel of light* or *God is my light*. In the apocryphal gospels he is associated with the presence of God, particularly with repentance and rescue.

Michael

But today we are talking about **Michael**. The name Michael means *Who is like God?*

How was Michael like God? Michael and his angels made war against Satan and Satan’s angels. And Satan was defeated and cast down upon the Earth. The Earth is God’s creation and is full of beauty and wonder and joy and laughter, but we know that we will also find evil – cruelty, exploitation, suffering, indifference to the suffering of others, and we also find the lure of things like wealth, popularity and security that are not evil in themselves but may be so if they are put above the things of God’s kingdom.

Satan / Evil

The vision of Satan as dragon reminds us that evil is different in its very nature. It is tempting to see a single person or circumstance as evil and use any means to remove it, thinking this will fix all. But this is the lure of the end justifying the means. We are accountable for the means as well as the end of our endeavours. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said that the line between good and evil runs through the human heart. If this is so, the battle between good and evil is not just cosmic and spiritual, but also political, sociological, and highly personal.

The war against evil is an ongoing business and we are in it for the long haul. In this we are not helpless. We have powerful weapons. Michael is usually pictured in armour and carrying a sword. The Book of Revelation tells about Michael’s weapons. They are not swords and spears, or guns and bombs. What are they? Verse 11 says “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.” This is a picture of faithful endurance or, even more, of enduring faithfulness.

Weapons

The first weapon is the blood of the lamb. By his death on the cross, Jesus destroyed the power of evil and of death. John 3: 17 says *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.* For all time, we are taken from the power of Satan and held safely in God's hands, whatever may befall us in our lives. Added to that, we have the power of the word of testimony, and a willingness to give our lives to Christ. We may not be called to lose our lives as the martyrs did, but we are certainly called to witness to Christ, to lose the ego-driven life of the world to live Kingdom-lives, the life we are truly called to.

Like us, Nathanael was called to witness to Christ. Let's look a little more closely at Nathanael's call to Christ.

Nathanael and Jesus

Today's gospel reading is a strange one. In the gospel story, Nathanael (another "el" name, Nathanael means *gift of God*) is a witness to the one who is the Son of God. He is only mentioned twice in the Bible, both times in John's gospel. There is this story about Nathanael being astonished that Jesus knows all about him, and twenty chapters later, after the resurrection, Nathanael is mentioned as being with the other disciples when Jesus directs them to let down their nets for a miraculous catch of fish.

Just before today's passage about Nathanael and the fig tree, John tells us about Jesus gathering his disciples. In verse 45 of today's reading, Phillip finds Nathanael and says "we have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote."

Phillip is saying that they have found the Messiah.

But 2 verses earlier, John says that it was Jesus who found Phillip. Perhaps we can only find Jesus because he first finds us, just as we love God because God first loves us. Did you first find Jesus through friends or family, or did you discover when you least expected it that Jesus had first found you?

There are a thousand stories here. But all who follow Jesus recognise that in meeting Jesus, they have met with God.

Phillip tells Nathanael that they have found the Messiah. Nathanael is interested in who this Messiah might be. But when he hears that it is Jesus, known as the son of Joseph from Nazareth, he is astonished. Nathanael is from Cana. Like Nazareth, Cana is also in Galilee. With typical small town or even big city rivalry, Nathanael speculates whether Nazareth could produce anything good.

Phillip does not try to persuade him. He just says “Come and see.” This is the sort of invitation we issue to others. We invite them to come to Jesus. “Come and see; come and experience for yourself.”

God’s kingdom

Nathanael is astonished to find when he meets Jesus that Jesus already knows about him, not just superficially but about his essential being. Jesus assures Nathanael that he will see even greater things. He will see “heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Nathanael is promised a glimpse of glory: of the glory of the resurrection and ascension, of the glory of Christ in full communication and communion with the Father, of Christ in His glory surrounded by angels.

In conclusion, when we hear talk of angels, as Christians we think not of the little dress-up angels with tinsel halos but of God’s relationship with the world, and of the glory of Christ, surrounded by the awe and the wonder of mighty angels who proclaim God’s strength, healing, presence and very nature.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, you govern the courses of this world by means too wonderful for us to comprehend: give us reverence before the mysteries of your providence, and grace to know the messengers of your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**