

## St Michael and All Angels 2019

I was once Vicar of a parish dedicated to the Patronage of St Michael and All Angels, whose Feast Day we celebrate today. It seems a long time ago now, but one thing I remember vividly about the church was the rather undistinguished statue of St Michael, which stood halfway down the nave. When my wife first saw it, she declared: "*He looks just like Nora Batty in armour!*"

But of course, because Michael is an Archangel, a heavenly being, it is perhaps more difficult to portray him convincingly in any art form than is the case with other saints.

In the Bible, angels, the heavenly messengers, are the link between heaven and earth. They are signs of contact between earthy things and the divine, and their task is to carry out the divine *will*: the most obvious example being, perhaps, the angel Gabriel, who declared God's will to Mary at the annunciation: the *announcement* that she would give birth to the Saviour of the World.

And angels appear in both our readings this morning. These readings are examples of "apocalyptic literature": i.e. the ancient Jewish, prophetic writing through which things previously unknown are revealed through visions, transmitted by angels. And so, we have Daniel's vision of an angel reassuring him that his people will not be overcome by the kingdom of Persia, during the war that was already swirling around the region at the time. "*Do not fear, greatly beloved...*" says the angel, "*You are safe. Be strong and courageous*". Then, from the Book of Revelation we heard of John's powerful vision of the future, when an angel cries out for someone to open the scroll: a document in which the events of the end time are recorded. The only one who is worthy of such a task is the "*Lamb*" who, by breaking the seals on the scroll will bring about the events through which God will be triumphant. The lamb is, of course, Christ, who has conquered through his death and resurrection. And, as we heard, the passage concludes with a cosmic vision of the court of heaven with God, seated on his throne and the lamb at his side, receiving blessing, honour and

glory which will continue *“for ever and ever”*. God has triumphed over the powers of the earth for ever.

But, coming down to earth, as it were, it could easily escape our notice that these two readings have an important and challenging message for our own time.

Both are about the conflict between faith and opposition to it: Judaism in the case of Daniel and Christianity in the case of Revelation. Daniel is being reassured that the pagan kingdoms will not overcome God’s people and in Revelation, John is receiving a vision which offers the same promise.

John is writing at the height of the Roman Empire and his vision quite clearly relates to the conflict between Christianity and the power of the Caesars. The description of the court of heaven deliberately resonates with the earthly Roman court at the time, with all the cheering, the honour and glory, similar to that which was poured out on the Emperor every time he appeared in public.

And so these visions, deliberately crafted to underscore the rule of God in contrast to the secular powers, surely poses questions to us: questions about what our faith has to say about the political ferments that are swirling around in the world today, not least in our own country.

We are all baptised into life in Christ. He abides in us and we in him. So, we are now messengers of the divine will. We are called to live our lives in such a way that makes God’s will visible in the world today. In other words, we are challenged to *“be an angel”*.

Does this not include challenging the powers of this world, when they seem to ignore the rule of God and when individuals set themselves up as little Caesars? All over the world, power is being abused and from the attempt to oust the deputy leader of the Labour party, to leaders of other nations behaving like dictators, to our own Prime Minister’s recent actions having been declared against the law, Christian people need to see such things through the lens of the Gospel. We need to be ready

to take a view and perhaps *share* a view based on what light our faith throws on such issues. Being an angel can sometimes involve being prophetic.

We are given the grace for this to happen, not least by taking time with God, in prayer, developing an inner peace through such time, taking time to listen and to reflect on scripture. It's not always easy and needs practice. But perhaps the starting point is given to us in the Book of Daniel this morning: "*Do not fear, greatly beloved. You are safe. Be strong and courageous*".