

Sermon: St Michael & All Angels...

The title *St Michael* means *he who is like God*. Michael was known to the prophet Daniel in ancient Israel and he has been venerated by all the churches from the beginning. The early Greek Fathers called him *Chief Militant* and *Archistrategos* – literally *the General Officer Commanding*. The Egyptian Christians long ago dedicated the Nile as *St Michael's River*. And when Germany was converted from paganism, all the mountains dedicated to Wotan were re-consecrated to Michael. That's why there are so many chapels to St Michael on mountain peaks in Germany. Wagner ought to have noticed that before he wrote his pagan epic

Most vividly, St Michael is the Archangel of the Apocalypse: *There was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon*. War in heaven? There's a thought for the manufacturers of religious greetings cards. St Michael, you might say, is not the favourite saint of our bishops and synods who are still urging us to apologise for every military campaign from the Crusades to Trafalgar, from the bombing raids on Germany to the war in Iraq

But there is holy warfare going on all the time. And we are called to be like the Christians mentioned in this morning's Epistle – *who loved not their lives unto the death*. I can hear people saying, *Hang on – that's a bit extreme isn't it? It's picture language surely?* Yes, it is picture language, and the pictures are true representations of what is going on. There is a cosy picture of the Christian faith in England and we can shut our eyes and call it up any time we like. It's there in Charles Dickens' sugary stories about crippled children and fog – *the London peculiar*. It's in John Betjeman's old man's drowsy talk about *ties* and *dad*; in his doubt about the basics of the faith: *And is it true, and is it true?* Notice how he says it twice – just to show us he's a poet?

The cosy view is there in the fragrance of polished pews and slightly musty hymnbooks full of very musty 19th century hymns. Plenty of diminished chords and the sun streaming through the west window at Evensong. The aroma from the just-extinguished candles as it drifts down over the nave. The aromatic blend of ritual and red wine... Don't get me wrong. I'm not knocking it. I was brought up on it. There is peace and quiet and rest and comfort in our religion: *the sabbath rest by Galilee; the calm of hills above*. But St Michael reminds us that the usual condition of the faith is to be at war. And we are expected to fight, to be among those *who loved not their lives unto the death*.

We have a reminder of Christian warfare in our bell tower. There's a scar on the wall where it is said St Michael attacked the devil who was trying to get in. I've heard sceptics say to me over the years: *It wasn't done by St Michael – it was a bolt of lightning*. Where do these people keep their imagination? What do they think St Michael uses, for heaven's sake! Lightning is the first item in the Archangel's armoury.

All right, so if there is holy warfare where's the enemy? We are told about the enemy in the Epistle of Jude – the shortest book in the New Testament. It fits on to one page of the Bible. Have a look at it when you get home. We are told how to identify the enemies of Christ: they are *filthy dreamers who defile the flesh, despise dominion and*

...speak evil of dignities...brute beasts who corrupt themselves...these says St Jude are the spots in your feasts of charity...clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead...wandering stars to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. It's quite a distance from:

*And girls in slacks remember Dad,
And oafish louts remember Mum,*

So we are told our Christian warfare is against those who *defile the flesh*. It sounds terribly old fashioned, doesn't it – until you take a look at what's available on the telly and the Internet. Or you venture – foolishly – into any of our town centres in the evenings. We inhabit the consumerism of hell where all the sins have been redefined as *lifestyle choices*. And then the Epistle warns of those who *despise dominion and speak evil of dignities*. Old fashioned, is it? – when *deference* is sneered at as *outdated* by the yobs who run the mass media. *Brute beasts who corrupt themselves?* – just walk as far as the Tottenham Court Road.

Now St Jude's Epistle may be short, but he mentions St Michael. And what he has to say ought to interest us. He refers to a dispute between St Michael and the devil over the location of the tomb of Moses. In the Hebrew tradition no one knows where this tomb is. The devil is threatening to reveal it. Why? So that the people will turn to hero worship, put neon signs over Moses' tomb as a tourist attraction, let the cash registers roll and exploit Moses as a celeb. St Michael will have none of this. He knows the significance of Moses as the giver of God's Law and will not have him turned into a personality cult.

So you see how up-to-date the New Testament is when telling it as it is. They were doing the same in those days as we're doing today: we look at the *filthy dreamers who defile the flesh*. And we turn them into celebs. D'you want Pete Docherty or that geriatric corrupter of the youth Mick Jagger as your role model? In an especially nasty piece of blasphemy, they call their idols *icons*. And Kate Moss has actually made more millions as a result of her being convicted of a hard drugs offence? Her sponsors claim they were *shocked* at the news – thus revealing pinnacles of hypocrisy not seen since the former Chairman of the Liturgical Commission stuck his head out of the belfry at Salisbury. What do you think they mean these days by *partying*? It's not musical chairs. And there's as much cocaine as booze in the City of London.

The modern world, no less than the ancient world, makes heroes out of the people who are destroying it. Those ancient debauchers would turn Moses into a celeb even while despising the law that he gave them.

The New Testament has the habit of getting things right – telling it as it is. So we had better listen to what it says in today's Epistle: *Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath*. Did we doubt it? Just look around. But the Epistle also tells us there is going to be a reckoning. Or, as today's jargon has it, *the present situation is not sustainable*. The devil has *great wrath because he knoweth that he hath but a short time*.

Because the devil knows there will be a reckoning he is working overtime, doing his worst. Or as we might say today: *things will get a whole lot worse before they get*

better. We wonder just how much worse they can get. St Michael is the Archangel of the Apocalypse. The New Testament gets everything else right, has human nature bang to rights. Its prophecy of the end will be right too. There *will* be a judgement. In the meantime the war goes on and we are called to fight it – against the tide of filth and lawlessness, of corrupt images pretending to be icons; of depravity masquerading as enlightenment; of the destroyers of public morality portraying themselves as its preservers; of evil calling itself good. We fight this war by prayer and protest, by enlisting in God's service becoming among those who *loved not their lives unto the death.*

And our Patron Saint will have his way. There *will* be a reckoning, a judgement, a last battle:

And you will hear *a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation and strength and the Kingdom of our God and the power of his Christ for the accuser of our brethren is cast down.* And so I say unto you: *Soldiers of Christ arise!*