

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

on The Feast of Michael and All Angels

Sunday 29 September 2024



St Matthew's Church

20 Great Peter Street, London SW1P 2BU

Genesis 28:10-17

Revelation 12:7-12

Mark 9: 30-37

"And war broke out in heaven". May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit". Amen

"Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" cried Hamlet on the battlements of Elsinore Castle as he saw his father's ghost and learned from him the saga of evil which proved that "something is rotten in this state of Denmark".

And not only in Denmark. Whether it is portrayed in a Shakespearian tragedy or in our reading today from the Book of Revelation or in the experiences of evil in our own time from Auschwitz to Al-Fayed all around us we ought to be able to see the clearest possible signs that spiritual warfare has raged, is raging and will continue to rage throughout human life in our fallen world.

This is not a vague cosmic struggle way above our earthly heads or in faraway countries of which we know nothing.

In his great book *The Gulag Archipelago* Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote this: "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart".

Solzhenitsyn's sombre warning does not usually get much attention on the joyful feast of St Michael and All Angels.

Today here at St Matthew's we will soon be singing, like many other churches, hymns which are perhaps rather too triumphalist, as they proclaim with certainty the glorious victory of the Angels over the Devil.

The message from our hymnody is clear, telling us that:

*"Ye watchers and ye holy ones,
bright seraphs, cherubim, and thrones,
virtues, Archangels, Angels, choirs..."*

And other celestial good guys – have won!

Alleluia! Alleluia!

That is the jubilant theme of this morning's High Day and Holy Day Feast of St. Michael and All Angels.

Now of course, especially here at St. Matthew's, we love a good party and a good celebration. So we will all enjoy making the Welkin ring when we open our hearts and voices to proclaim these splendid sentiments in our closing hymn. But as we used to say in Fleet Street: "Hold the front page!" Or as holders of Insurance Policies ought to be advised: "Read the Small Print."

For Michael and his Angels may well have won the war in Heaven. But there remains a dark side of unfinished business here on earth to this war.

When we go back to the end of our reading, there is an ominous last verse, as the visionary author of the Book of Revelation, John of Patmos, warns his readers: "Woe to the earth...for the devil has come down to you with great wrath."

This warning, like Solzhenitsyn's warning, is a reminder that the Devil is still alive and still with us, still busy in a multitude of both subtle and serious Satanic ways. But do we really believe this in our secular 21st Century?

Most of us churchgoers probably do believe in good Angels. Not necessarily with their supernatural harps, halos and wings but perhaps because we are occasionally fortunate enough to meet angelic servants and messengers of

God in natural earthly disguise in ordinary life today. Doing God's work. So good Angels exist but accepting the existence of the Devil and his bad

Angels is often a step too far for many Liberal Christians, let alone sceptics and agnostics.

Not many of them believe in Satan, Lucifer, Mephistopheles, The Evil One or The Enemy. Let alone Old Nick clad in a scarlet red tunic waving around a pitchfork. But before we let the mockers have their fun, we need to tread carefully here. Heeding the warning of John Wesley who used to say "No Devil – no God".

One of the strongest reasons for believing in the Devil as a force of evil is that in his earthly ministry. Jesus himself clearly believed in the existence of Satan because He had to fight against him in several encounters such as: The Temptation in the wilderness, numerous casting outs of evil spirits and he saw the terrible example of Judas Iscariot whom Satan entered into, so the Gospels tell us just after he had taken the bread from Jesus at the Last Supper.

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After the Resurrection, the Disciples of Jesus followed their Lord and Master's lead when it came to fighting Satan. Harken to what St. Peter said in his first Epistle: "Discipline yourselves. Keep alert. Like a roaring lion, your enemy the Devil prowls around looking for someone to devour. So, resist him, steadfast in your faith." (1 Peter 5: 8-9)

If the 1st Century Church was so steadfast in its hostility to the Devil, why has the 21st Century Church become so reluctant to believe in a personal Satan, often ridiculing him?

I must admit that until about 25 years ago, even when I was a member of the congregation here, I was personally rather laid back about the Devil, talking about him, if at all, in a tongue-in-cheek sort of way.

But then there came a turning point in my journey of faith, when I was persuaded by a famous Jesuit priest, Father Gerard Hughes, author of "*God of Surprises*", to go on a retreat to do the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. It was a life-changing experience, but that's another story.

And in those Exercises, there comes a point where the retreatants are given a gripping word picture of how the Devil works. It begins with the phrase: "Satan seated on his smoky throne" – itself a riveting image of the Devil writhing around on a vast volcanic platform. To his throne he summons all his junior devils and as he sends them down to earth to do their dirty work as trainee tempters Satan tells all the junior devils that far and away the best and easiest way to trap humans is to tempt them in their Pride. Once you've caught them in their Pride, continues Satan, it will be so easy to tempt them into other sins such as anger or avarice or apathy.

Apathy, by the way, may well be the *vice anglaise* of the 21st Century Church of England.

Our present squabbles and wrestlings remind me of an amusing political malapropism of my late parliamentary colleague, Willie Whitelaw. He was huffing and puffing indignantly about a rival who he accused of "going around the country, stirring up apathy".

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Now, getting back to Ignatius, or indeed, the entire counter-reformation or Catholic reformation, stirring up zeal, not apathy, was the driving force.

The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, full as they are of visionary imagery not unlike the Book of Revelation, are derived from Christ's most vigorous teachings.

So they provide, as the Gospels do, an arsenal of weapons for defeating the Devil such as: Prayer, spiritual discipline, humility and Christ centred obedience.

And on that front, Ignatius instructs everyone who does his exercises that they must answer three questions:

- What have I done for Christ?
- What am I doing for Christ?
- What ought I do for Christ?

Now these three questions, sometimes called the Three Great Ignatian Questions, should challenge each and every one of us.

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And we need such challenges, because unless we stiffen our spiritual sinews and strengthen our feeble knees, in order to start fighting the good fight against the Devil, then we will go on losing important battles in the spiritual war that once raged in Heaven and now rages on our own doorsteps, in our own Churches, and in our own hearts here on earth.

On the subject of challenges, let's remember that we were spectacularly challenged here in St. Matthew's only eight days ago, in a powerful Patronal Festival sermon from the Bishop of South East Florida, Peter Eaton. Many of you heard and were stirred by his remarkable words.

Bishop Peter reminded us that even in our deepest frustration, we should remember and I quote: "That the Church is before all else an intimate part of the life of the living God". That is why in the Creed we say: "We believe in one holy, Catholic and apostolic Church".

Bishop Peter concluded his Patronal Festive sermon by saying, (and I again quote): "Let us not forget that it is Matthew who records the story of Jesus handing over to Peter and his disciples, and so to you and to me, the keys of the Kingdom. Keys that can either open or close, admit or exclude, give hope or quash expectations."

So the question is always before us: "What are we going to do with those keys?"

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The fact that we at St. Matthew's need to answer such a question today is an indication that spiritual warfare is still raging around us.

We are too divided by today's disputes within the Church of England, sometimes demoralised by doubts about our message, and our role in today's society and trouble by our old enemy the Devil, prowling around rather too successfully at present.

So, how do we resist him? As St. Peter told us in his Epistle, by being "steadfast in our faith".

What form that steadfastness takes will depend on our answers to those three Ignatian Questions which I repeat again:

- What have I done for Christ?
- What am I doing for Christ?
- What ought I do for Christ?

I know St. Matthew's well enough to be confident that within our Church family there will be many good, faithful and steadfast answers.

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And as we are now starting to work on our future spiritual and practical plans for the next chapter of our Parish life, may our answers guide our Church and our community to win a victory worthy of St. Michael and All Angels in the months and years ahead.

AMEN