

St Michael and All Angels

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-16, John 1:45-51, Revelation 12:7-12a

I'd like to begin with a question that you have all probably given much more thought to than I have:

Why would a church call itself St Michael's and All Angel's?

All the other churches I have served have been named after human characters in the Bible – People who wrote the Gospels or who were integral to the spread of the faith in the first century: People like St Mark, St John, St Barnabas and St Paul.

These people are like us in lots of ways, people whose lives were a little like ours; people who, if we met them and managed to get past the barriers of language and culture, we could have a lovely conversation with over a cup of tea and a piece of cake.

But Michael, and the other angels... What would we do if we met them? We probably wouldn't offer them a cup of tea. We would probably not be able to speak, and maybe we would faint with fear, as so many people in the Bible seem to do when they encounter an angel?

Why name a church after something so mysterious and scary?

Churches usually aspire to be like their namesake. At Charnwood, being a St Barnabas church inspires us to be a generous, encouraging and uplifting presence in our community, like Barnabas was in his.

How does that apply in a church named after angels? How might we even begin to aspire to be like the archangel Michael?

The Bible doesn't even tell us what an archangel is.

In the 16th century, John Milton wrote the fictional works *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and his books have been so influential that most of the things people think now about angels come from his fiction rather than from the Bible. And because I'm not a great fan of Milton, you might hear me grumble occasionally about people holding fictional beliefs and thinking they are Biblical.

What the Bible actually says about angels can feel patchy and confusing. Thinking about them can take us on a path that leads deep into mystery, and we are not always sure we want to go there!

The vision Daniel describes of God's crowded court is too full of light and sound and strange characters for us to take it in or for him to find language to communicate it. The noise of those ten thousand times ten thousand attendants praising God would have been deafening.

So let's talk about those attendants.

Are they all angels? Or do they represent every people, nation and language group that serve the one like a human being. Or is each one an angel that stands guard over their designated people group? It isn't clear, but later in Daniel, Michael will be introduced as "the prince of [Daniel's] people", that is, the protecting angel of the descendants of Abraham. Other nations are spoken of as having their own protectors. The subjection of the Jews to the Persians is pictured in Daniel as a battle between Michael and the prince of Persia.

All these attendants serve the one true God. Daniel is teaching that although each nation might have its own unique spiritual identity, there is only one God.

Whatever these attendants represent, we notice that Daniel approaches one of them and asks for an explanation. We find this sort of character again in the Book of Revelation – an angel who acts like a tour guide to a person experiencing a vision of God's throne. The explanations are not necessarily any easier to understand than the visions. The attendant doesn't make it simple for the human to understand, but they do assure the human that they are not alone in this huge, overwhelming, scary place. We are to understand from that, I think, that none of us is alone in huge, overwhelming, scary realities we sometimes find ourselves in.

So perhaps Daniel has given us a couple of reasons why we might name a church after angels: Angels in the Bible teach us to be in awe before the mystery of God's throne; they act as translators to help us grasp things of God that are beyond our understanding, and they are companions, assuring us they we are not alone.

That is what we seek to do in our community. We invite our neighbours to stand in awe with us before the mystery and majesty of God, we do our best to help our neighbours grow in their understanding of God, and we assure them we are willing to be with them, so they don't need to face a scary world alone.

Jesus speaks like this in John 1, where angels come and go from heaven – as messengers and envoys between God and humanity. This is how we usually meet angels in the Scriptures. In fact the Greek word translated as angel literally means "messenger". Most famously, Gabriel brought the message to Mary that she was to be the mother of the one who would bring liberation and justice to all who are oppressed.

We keep that in mind as we turn to the Book of Revelation, written to churches that are experiencing oppression and need to understand that Jesus is their saviour even though their lives feel anything but safe.

The dragon we meet in chapter 12 appears to represent the powers of empire that are arrayed against the church.

There is so much rich imagery here, but the question I want to ask this morning is, "Who defeats the dragon?"

Take another look at the passage from Revelation. Who defeats the dragon?

Is it Michael? (Rev 12:7-8)

Is it the blood of the lamb (the crucified and resurrected Jesus) that brings about the triumph? (12:11a)

Or is it the martyrs – whose willingness to die rather than renounce their faith in Jesus brings the victory? (12:11b)

Or is it all the sisters and brothers, that is, all Christian people who testify about Jesus? (12:10:b-11:a)

Or is it God?

If we read on, we find that the dragon who has been defeated but not yet annihilated is even opposed but the earth itself.

Who defeats the dragon?

It is each of the above and all of the above together.

We all grapple with this as we face the dragons of our own time:

Who will go into battle for us against the forces of war and ethnic cleansing and bring peace to our world?

Who will go into battle for us against the forces of violent misogyny and bring loving respect to our homes, our streets and our meeting places?

Who will go into battle for us against the forces of environmental destruction and return flourishing to the earth?

Who will go into battle for us against the forces of rampant capitalism and ensure that everyone has enough?

Those are the questions people in our community are asking, and it is such questions that are leading people all over the world to put dictators in power. They are so desperate for someone to fight their battles, so they won't have to feel so powerless, that they give what power they have to a dragon.

What is our answer to those questions as Christian people – and especially as the people of St Michael and All Angels!

Who defeats the dragon?

Who stands up to the forces of evil in our world?

We might answer like this:

We are not alone in any of these battles. There are spiritual forces on our side and by our side working for the ultimate triumph of faith, hope, love, joy and peace.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is bringing ultimate victory over injustice and violence.

God will ensure God's intentions for a flourishing world are fulfilled. And the earth, created good by God, will participate in its own healing.

We are not alone in any of our battles. But that doesn't mean we sit back and let the big players do all the work.

We are called to testify to the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are called to oppose the destructive forces of our world, and work to bring justice and peace to our small encounters in our little corner of the world. We are called to cling to Christ more than we cling to our own life.

We all slay the dragon together.

There's one more thing that is important to notice about Michael in the Book of Revelation. We saw in Daniel that there was a vague hint that perhaps each people group has its own angel, with Michael as the angel protecting Daniel's people, the descendants of Abraham.

The Book of Revelation reflects a challenge to that interpretation. In Revelation, Michael is not fighting for a particular people group but for followers of Jesus from every nation and every language. Michael isn't fighting against the angels of other nations or languages. He is fighting the dragon and the angelic forces that have joined the dragon in opposing all humanity and the whole church.

Ten years ago, I wouldn't have felt a need to stress that point, but since then we have seen disturbing use being made of the book of Daniel in relation to nationalism. We have seen that Daniel is a little unclear about the relationship between angelic powers and people groups, but the book of Revelation is not at all unclear. Here we see people of every nation and every language streaming into the holy city. They bring all that is good from their culture with them, but they leave behind all border conflicts and national animosities. And they worship God together.

So, back to the question I started with: Why would a church name itself after angels? I think we have a few good reasons, based on the Bible's depiction of angels:

- Angels teach us to be in awe before the mystery of God's throne;
- they act as translators to help us grasp things of God that are beyond our understanding,
- they are companions, assuring us they we are not alone
- they are champions for us in the big battles for justice and for peace
- and they stand above the petty conflicts that divide people of different nations and perspectives.

It is a very big calling for us to do those things for our community. It can feel a bit overwhelming. But to bring that calling back to a manageable size, let's go back to this morning's reading from John's Gospel.

When Philip wanted to convince his sceptical friend, Nathaniel, that Jesus is the one to whom all their Scriptures had been pointing, he didn't present a watertight argument with lots of Bible verses.

What did he say?

Come and see.

Come and see.

Meet Jesus for yourself.

Telling our friends a big story about archangels fighting by our side and on our side may or may not be helpful. But we can always say Come and See.

Come and see a community that cares about the big issues of justice in our world, and conscientiously does the little stuff we can do knowing the ultimate victory belongs to the one who died for us.

Come and see a community that lives according to a reality that is bigger and brighter and better than we can fully understand.

Come and see a community that stands in awe before the majesty of the God who is worshipped by all the host of heaven and - ultimately – by all the people of earth.

And come with us to see the beautiful, wise, powerful, loving God who is worthy of all our worship.

Amen