

## WHO IS LIKE GOD?<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Feast of Michael and All Angels, 29 September 2024**

Welcome to my name day! I have no idea why my parents named me Michael; it's not a family name. I doubt, however, that Michael the Archangel played any part in their choice; their Methodist heritage did not celebrate this feast. I suspect that my mother liked the name, which would have been enough. It was to be many years before I discovered that "Michael" is a Hebrew word meaning, "Who is like God?" and more to discover that this was a question, not a statement.

I hope that you will forgive me if I concentrate on my namesake and give the other archangels and angels a miss, after I clear up a few minor matters. First, what is an archangel? The Greek word, ἄγγελος, means "messenger". In that case, an ἀρχάγγελος is a chief messenger, in the same way as an archbishop is a chief bishop. Possibly, an archangel brings more important messages. Gabriel, for example, was the messenger at the Annunciation.

Second, how many angels can dance on the point of a needle?<sup>2</sup> This question possibly arose when 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant reformers used it to mock Catholic scholastic theologians. It may also involve a pun between "needle's point" and "needless point", that is such discussions were always pointless. They may have been referring to St Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Question 53, where he asked whether an angel can be in a place, or be in several places at once, or whether several angels can be in the same place.<sup>3</sup>

Aquinas's answer was that an angel can be in a place but not in the same way as we are. Our bodies, he says, have "quantity" or dimension. Using a now very up to date idea, he says that an angel's presence is "virtual". According to Aquinas, an angel may be present but occupying no space. Thus, the answer to the critic's question, if indeed it was ever asked, is "an infinite number". Rest assured; I haven't wasted your time by referring to this strange debate.

What do we know about Michael? The correct answer, following Aquinas, is that we know nothing about him, since we can never meet him as an archangel. He does not occupy space in the way that we do. One response would then be to stop this sermon and get on with the rest of the Eucharist. But our proper line of discovery is to see what is said about him and to ask what it all means. The exploration of meaning is a proper task of a sermon.

As I speak, I look at our magnificent window. Michael is depicted holding his symbols, a balance in one hand and a flaming sword in the other. His feet trample the defeated dragon. But I must tell you, however, that the task of finding and declaring what all this means has been one of the most difficult in my preaching career. We find ourselves deeply immersed in symbolic imagery. For some of that imagery we may have lost, or do not understand, the key. Moreover, much of the imagery has been taken over in unhelpful ways.

Michael has five mentions in the Bible: three in Daniel; one in Jude; and one in Revelation, the passage that we have read this morning. That four of the five appear in Daniel and Revelation reminds us that we are reading a form of biblical literature called "apocalyptic". This kind of

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Psalm 138; Revelation 12:7-12a; John 1:45-51

<sup>2</sup> [How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>3</sup> [SUMMA THEOLOGIAE: The angels in relation to place \(Prima Pars, Q. 52\) \(newadvent.org\)](#)

literature intends to reveal or disclose to us things that are normally hidden from us, including using the future as a way to reassure God's people in difficult times.

The book of Daniel draws on traditions dating back to the Babylonian exile but appears to have been compiled in the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes,<sup>4</sup> the Hellenistic ruler of the Holy Land from 175 BC to 164 BC, the same time as the Jewish Maccabean revolt,<sup>5</sup> the record of which is currently part of the readings at evening prayer. Both periods were of great difficulty for the Jewish people. For this reason, Daniel, never a real person, serves, through stories set in the past, to encourage the Jews in their later history. Michael forms part of that encouragement by appearing as a protector of the people.<sup>6</sup>

But, this morning, I will concentrate on our reading from Revelation, which is set in the Roman province of Asia during the reign of the Emperor Domitian.<sup>7</sup> Although Christians were persecuted during this time, the principal concern of this book is how Christians will relate to the ideology and power of the Roman empire, whether they are persecuted or not. Either way, Rome is the threat. As Richard Bauckham comments:

By no means all of [John's] readers were poor and persecuted by an oppressive system: many were affluent and compromising with the oppressive system. ... Worshipping the beast was something many of John's Christian readers were tempted to do or were actually doing or even ... justified.<sup>8</sup>

In our liturgy, we come closest to Revelation in the season of Advent. Wesley's hymn, "Lo, he comes with clouds descending"<sup>9</sup> is an extended contemplation of a single verse, Revelation 1:7:

Look! He is coming with the clouds;  
every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him;  
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

It is just this message that has been taken over by some forms of popular religion, prophesying the end of the world and the overthrow of those that they characterise as a cosmic opposition and the establishment of the now powerless true believers as rulers.<sup>10</sup>

If we, as mainline Christians, want a better theological account, we would begin by recognising that Revelation is principally about what God has done in Jesus Christ:

that God has acted critically, decisively, and finally for Israel, all the peoples of the earth, and the entire cosmos, in the life, death, resurrection, and coming again of Jesus ...<sup>11</sup>

The expression of this gives rise to the unforgettable imagery, which includes how we might think of Michael. He appears by implication in Revelation 8:2, where John sees "the seven

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<sup>4</sup> [Antiochus IV Epiphanes - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Maccabean Revolt - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>6</sup> Daniel 12:1

<sup>7</sup> [Book of Revelation - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>8</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation (New Testament Theology)* (p. 15). Cambridge University Press

<sup>9</sup> *New English Hymnal* 9

<sup>10</sup> See D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 63.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph L Mangina, *Revelation*, (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible): Baker Publishing Group

angels who stand before God, a reference to the seven archangels traditionally known as Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Sariel, Gabriel and Michael.<sup>12</sup> They stand like State Trumpeters at the coronation and sound their trumpets, foretelling immense events.

How, then, are we to take the statement, “war broke out in heaven”? Certainly not literally. It is neither a description nor a prediction. Revelation uses the concept of war to emphasise the seriousness of the struggle facing the Christian readers. It raises the significance of the situation of John’s readers to the highest possible level. Baulkham describes it in this way:

By using the military image ... John is able to pose most effectively the crucial issue of how one sees things. Is the world a place in which military and political might carries all before it or is it one in which suffering witness to the truth prevails in the end?<sup>13</sup>

The defeat of Satan by Michael is the symbol of the victory brought about by the Lamb, that is, by Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. Because John’s readers already know how that victory was won, they will understand that the victory was by suffering witness. They will not be seduced into thinking that this depiction endorses physical war in our world. On the contrary, the victory means that such violence should be unnecessary.

Where does that leave us? Truly, in the same place as the original readers. We cannot avoid the reality that our world is still the world of violence, oppression and fear. We cannot avoid the reality that we are still tempted to conform to the ways of the world as we find them. We still need to be convinced that the victory has been won.

Of course, our context is different from that of the first century Christians; we must respond to our own times with all its challenges. But, if we look to Michael, we could ask for his sword to strip away what is unnecessary and for his balance to weigh our choices. At least, that’s how Anglican priest and poet, Malcolm Guite<sup>14</sup> expresses it, although we should note that, for him, Michaelmas is in autumn:

Michaelmas gales assail the waning year,  
And Michael’s scale is true, his blade is bright.  
He strips dead leaves; and leaves the living clear  
To flourish in the touch and reach of light.  
Archangel bring your balance, help me turn  
Upon this turning world with you and dance  
In the Great Dance. Draw near, help me discern,  
And trace the hidden grace in change and chance.  
Angel of fire, Love’s fierce radiance,  
Drive through the deep until the steep waves part,  
Undo the dragon’s sinuous influence  
And pierce the clotted darkness in my heart.  
Unchain the child you find there, break the spell  
And overthrow the tyrannies of Hell.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Notice that each of the names ends in “el”, denoting God: Uriel—God is my flame; Raphael—God has healed; Raguel—God shall pasture; Michael—Who is like God?; Sariel—God is my ruler; Gabriel—Power of God; Remiel—God has thundered.

<sup>13</sup> Baulkham, p. 91

<sup>14</sup> [Malcolm Guite - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Michaelmas; a sonnet for St. Michael the Archangel | Malcolm Guite \(wordpress.com\)](#)

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Michael  
My icon



St Michael  
St James, King Street