

Hymns: 84 Praise the Lord his glories show
69 Ye holy angels bright
658 a charge to keep I have
662 have you heard God's voice

Readings: Revelation 12.7-12
Psalm 103 (823)
John 1.47-51

'Michael at our back'

Holy God, break your word among us for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you sight o Lord our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

Yesterday was in the church calendar the feast of St Michael and all angels - as a Methodist I don't often get to talk about angels – angels are something of a dirty secret in Methodist spirituality. So I stand before you as one with a dirty secret to tell.

It is good that we are gathered on this morning, on this particular Sunday. All through the City today people are right now coming and going, nodded to and ignored each other – Pushing

babies and shopping carts, walking frames or sticks, calling down the street, holding doors and walking through them. Rushing past in cars at lights, bursts of music.

We are among these busy people: and we come today with all the different priorities and places of our days.

And now we pause here in worship to call to mind the angel Michael, the other angels of the big four mentioned in scripture – Raphael, Uriel, and that one who is going to play a big part in Christmas proceedings, Gabriel.

The feast of St Michael has given its name to the autumn term in a certain kind of English school or college that still uses words like Michelmas – and St Michael as a phrase has been used as a brand name to sell underpants at Marks and Spencer, as well as being among the most common church dedications.

As with so many saints' days and festivals, Michelmas has been layered with folk tradition far

more durable than formal theology about angels and their place in catholic and reformed thinking.

The Archangel Michael is God's champion, the protector of Israel. The one who fought evil without fear of death, in the strength of the blood of the lamb. The one who stood against evil and triumphed over it; cast the serpent from heaven.

He is usually pictured with his foot on a serpent's neck, a sword held high – he is an heroic figure.

We who are used to seeing big blockbuster movies have more visual images to call to mind for scripture like this that our forebears – We've seen Thor and Captain America fight giants and robots and all, with our own eyes! And every generation has had its hero and villain stories, and told them around fires and tables and yes, in cinemas – to scare the children and encourage the adults, and reassure us that there is nothing to fear in the dark.

But here is the problem. There is much to fear in the light and in the dark, evil is very real in our

world. In the hot violence of a knife drawn or an advancing army, as in the slow creeping violence of poverty, of prejudice. Evil is real, and it will take more than words to oppose it. It will take more than a hero – more than just being stronger and tougher and having a bigger hammer than the other guy. Here is where the scripture is completely different than any blockbuster film it might call to mind.

Michael's power is the power of the blood of the lamb, that is, sacrifice, love, costly engagement.

So I am not going to lay to rest formal questions about the being of angels, let alone what we think of the picture language in the Revelation of St. John. Thomas Aquinas reminded us that the important questions about angels are not arguments about their being, but the reality of what they do.

So I will say this: I am convinced that the world of heaven and earth around us is not empty, but full: we are accompanied in our days by many of God's messengers, angels. Sometimes we recognise

them, sometimes not. I am equally convinced that God's strength still stands against evil and the church must too, as must we, everyday Christians. With something more costly than a facebook 'angry' emoticon to show solidarity, more durable and than a press release or praise chorus.

Going into the season of short days and weak sun, the season of thin food and cold, of hospital beds and frozen ground, I pray for Michael at my back.

I pray for the strength of Michael and the angels in this place and for you. And I pray we be taken up in the work of angels ourselves, this supple, light footed, strong resistance to evil that refuses to lose the twinkle in its eye, refuses to despise the enemy, refuses to go away. I think of Michael at our back in the split second when any one of us draws in breath in anger, that moment when a perfectly healthy anger that needs expression can go the way of blessing, or cursing – then, I think of Michael at our back. To help us express our anger, our frustration with the world well. Not, never to suppress or deny it, but to express it well.

Not for nothing is Michael the patron saint of paratroopers, of police – people who go into situations of danger and violence, and stand in all the complexity for peace.

There are many traditions about Michelmas – like that we should never harvest blackberries after today – the legend has it that when the serpent fell, he fell into a patch of blackberries – and as one would, falling into blackberries, cursed them.

Loudly, I should imagine – knowing what thorns of a woody blackberry bush are like. I hear that no less an authority than Gardeners' question time on radio 4 says that there is some truth in the rule – no comment on its origins - that blackberries make some chemical change and become unpalatable. I'll leave it to your testing.

Another tradition from Skye in Scotland has it that on Michelmas Eve men may go out to steal horses – ostensibly for the pilgrimage on the feast day itself. As someone who last had a car that would have been improved by stealing, I warmed to this one!

And while the men were out doing the things I guess men do with horses and stealing them, the women were meant to be cooking protective cakes – made from all the different kinds of cereal grown on the farm and stirred with the prayer for,

*Progeny and prosperity of family,
Mystery of Michael,
Protection of the Trinity*

They invoked the name of Michael and the Trinity to protect and heal the one who ate the cake during the long months of winter.

We may do less with horses and cereal cakes these days, and I hope we understand prayer to be something more mysterious than a magic charm, but we still fear the long night.

When we come in from the bustle of our Mondays, those busy streets, and even behind our very secure doors with all the hope that faith brings, not to mention the paraphernalia of modern life – things like flat screen televisions and repeat prescriptions, we still fear the long night – which is why, among other reasons, we

are looking in our Saturday morning ecumenical book group at reclaiming darkness as a positive space in our faith thinking.

Fear is subtle - it creeps into me with fingers of anxiety. A lion prowling in the darkness.

Fear is real – and if we do not deal squarely with fear, it will drive us to run from evil, not to free ourselves from evil. And when we run, we give evil power. This was not Jesus’ way. It is not Michael’s way. It is not our way.

I pray for protection and that God will use me, and us, to protect others. Michelmas is still a feast invoking the strength of God against the evils we know, and against those we can only guess at.

Because here is the thing – where the wisdom of the world counsels protection from the places and persons who seem ‘cursed’ with tangled encroaching evil – stay away – from blackberry bushes as much as politics - our Gospel sends us right into the mess, to reject the power of evil.

The very situations that seem too ‘cursed’ to get a hold of – where the best advice is keep away to avoid being stung yourself – these are the places that our God goes.

The impossible tangle of peoples, political oppression, and power in Israel and Palestine. The horror of a post Genocide land trying to rebuild trust, as in Europe after the war, Rwanda after its convulsion. The mess of trying to reform our benefits system in this country, and sin of any elderly person waiting social services support that is not coming, in a land of abundance.

God sends us as angels even, to treat a different kind of tangled, sour, and thorned complexity, into contemporary US politics, reduced this week to the most painful and intimate claim and counter claim in the hearings over the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the US supreme court.

Michael we need you! Protector and intercessor, to encourage us and take us again for the work of justice. And in the blood of the lamb – which

means, not using the tools of the world, which have passing strength – by which I mean credit cards and the power of our skin colour or gender or ethnicity – but with the tools of Christ. Who emptied himself.

First there is the battle we all fight in our own hearts – for healing, and peace, for the power that comes from releasing bitterness when we struggle with losing a job or breaking a relationship – or when we struggle even years later with the evil done by a sexual assault, or other abuse – and for the grace to love the ones dear to us.

God does not counsel us to protect ourselves and pull up the drawbridge – but to stand in community for wholesome life in so many ways – yes, that those of us who have had evil done to us can speak and be listened to without shame. And those of us who have done harm, intentional or no, can find our way to healing.

Michael and the angels stand for wholesome community against the trade in humans that lurks just out of sight in the shadows of our busy

streets, this Monday. Against the difficulties of debt and hardship for money. The struggle for succour for the most vulnerable around us. For those without homes or bound by addiction, all of us who seek comfort in ways that do not last.

If Michael and his angels would fight for us today, alongside us, I hope they would fight the anxiety and pain that can accompany illness. I hope they would fight alongside every tired nurse and doctor, every teacher at work tonight.

Every nameless care assistant in our nursing homes. I hope they would stand alongside parents, and those broken in love, with those who come close to death. Standing without fear, in the strength of Jesus, the blood of the lamb.

And as Jesus promised Nathaniel, we too 'will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the son of man.' (John 1.51) Friends, I look around you and I see messengers, angels among us. I see heaven opened. We need Michael at our back.

Tomorrow the streets will fill again, and we will go about our busy ways. Nodding to each other, or ignoring each other, buying and selling, pushing babies and walking sticks. And the world of heaven and earth will still be full of saints and angels. And this house will stand day by day, to give us space to remember the heart of God – in Michael's name it will remind us of God's struggle against poverty of all kinds, and for abundance of life.

*Progeny and prosperity of family,
Mystery of Michael,
Protection of the Trinity*

In the dark of night as in the morning, fear not:
God is with us.