

## Sunday 29 September – Michael and All Angels

### Sermon by Anne-Marie Renshaw

*An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)*

#### War in heaven

“War broke out in heaven.” The opening words of our second reading, from the Book of Revelation, are truly ominous. Very few of us here today have any direct experience of war. We may think of war as something that happened in the past or happens somewhere else, to other people. Our news headlines are currently full of war. We can see the devastating impact of war on the people of Lebanon and Gaza, on ordinary people, people just like us, who were, until recently, going about the business of their lives, going to work, raising their children, keeping an eye on their grandparents, celebrating weddings, paying bills, fixing things around the house. War sweeps all of this away. It makes the ordinary business of life impossible. War is brutal. It destroys people’s homes and workplaces, divides families, forces people to flee, creates poverty, injures and kills people of any age who did not ask to be caught up in a war, but were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. War is terrifying.

So what are we to make of the idea of war breaking out in heaven? War doesn’t really fit with the mental image of heaven most of us carry. We tend to think of heaven as being a place of light and peace. Heaven is like the green pastures and still waters we find in Psalm 23. Heaven is the house of the Father, where we expect to be joyfully reunited with our departed loved ones. Heaven is like a great feast where all are invited. Heaven is where we will gather around the crystal sea, lost in wonder, love and praise, serenaded by angel-voices ever-singing. There is not supposed to be war in heaven.

But, in the Bible, heaven is perhaps not what we think it is. Heaven is not some idyllic place we go to after we die. Heaven is the dwelling-place of God. It is populated by angels and other mysterious beings, some of whom sound absolutely terrifying when they are described by prophets and visionaries. Heaven is the place from which the angels descend as they go about God’s business on earth. And, yes, heaven is the scene of an almighty conflict between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels.

The archangel Michael is described in the book of Daniel as having “a body like beryl, face like lightning, eyes like flaming torches, arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude.” This is not someone you want to argue with. The passage we read

today, describing the war in heaven, is part of a series of seven visions. The dragon against which Michael and his angels are fighting is also referred to as “that ancient serpent”, “the Devil and Satan”, “the deceiver of the whole world”. The “ancient serpent” calls to mind the beginning of Genesis, where Adam and Eve are tricked by the serpent into eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The name, “Satan”, is a very ancient Hebrew word meaning “adversary”. In the Old Testament, it is also used for human adversaries. It originally meant anyone who was opposing you. Later, it came to be used only to speak of the one who opposes everyone and deceives everyone. The first act of deceit is the one we have already been reminded of: tricking Adam and Eve into eating from the tree of good and evil, a symbol of wanting to know more than is good for them. We often speak of the innocence of children. The implication is that, if you don’t know very much, you are innocent, you can’t be held responsible for what you choose to do. You can’t be guilty of evil, because you don’t know what it is, anything you do wrong is just a mistake, not a deliberate choice. Once you know the difference between good and evil, you can knowingly choose to do something evil and you will be fully responsible for your action. The knowledge of good and evil creates the possibility of wrongdoing – sin – and the need for redemption. Satan deceives humankind by giving us access to the possibility of wrongdoing and so damaging the harmonious relationship between God and the created world.

In the vision described in Revelation 12, Satan and his angels are defeated by Michael and there is no longer any place for them in heaven. Satan and his angels are thrown out of heaven and end up on earth. “Woe to the earth and the sea,” proclaims a voice, “for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” Now, this sounds like very bad news indeed. The earth is in for a rough time because the devil is now located there and is in a very bad mood. Revelation is often understood to be a prediction of what’s going to happen at some time in the future, in which case this is a terrifying prospect. But what if this isn’t about the future so much as a description of what is already happening now? Now and indeed, throughout human history, the devil is having a field day on earth, seeking out every opportunity to deceive someone into doing wrong, because he knows that his time is short. Wouldn’t that explain a lot of the way things are? Why is there so much evil in the world? Short answer: because the devil got himself kicked out of heaven and is making the most of every minute he has to take it out on everybody else.

But then why does it say the time is short? What time is this? The two thousand years since Jesus’ death and resurrection? The however many years since the emergence of human life? Neither of those feels very short.

But God – and therefore heaven- stands outside of created time. Heaven runs on eternal time, compared to which anything that happens on earth is over in less than the blink of an eye. We can't imagine what it means to be outside time, because all our experience is lived within time. We are limited by time. And so, for now, is the devil. He is no longer in heaven, so he no longer dwells in eternity. Now, he is bounded by time, as we are, so he needs to get as much done as possible. That's why his time is short. He now has to worry about time. No one in heaven does.

So what does this passage mean for us, here and now, on this Sunday morning? Firstly, it reminds us that there is more going on than we might be aware of. We are caught up in a conflict between good and evil that spans the whole of human history. Evil is a reality. Evil is a choice that anyone can make. We see the consequences of evil all around us – in Gaza and Lebanon, in Ukraine, in Southport, in Harrods. But the second thing this passage tells us is that evil has already lost the war. The devil is full of wrath because he has already lost. He has already been thrown out of heaven and his time is short. Yes, there is woe and suffering on the earth, but the victory in heaven has already been won by Michael and his angels because of the victory won by Christ in his death and resurrection.

It is important to remember that Revelation was written for a church that was experiencing terrible persecution. Christians were being arrested, imprisoned, tortured and killed because of their faith. It must have been very difficult for the early church to hold onto their faith in the midst of all this. How did it make sense to speak of Christ's victory when their experience was only of suffering? How were they supposed to find joy and peace in all of this? Had sin and death really been defeated? Wasn't Satan winning after all? The message of this passage in Revelation is that Satan isn't causing so much harm because he is so strong, but because of his weakness: he knows he has already lost and his time is short. The message to persecuted Christians is to hold firm in their faith and know that their suffering will not last for ever. The war in heaven has already been won.

Perhaps we too need to hear that message. There is much suffering in the world today. It can be hard to hold onto hope when evil always seems to have the upper hand. The message of Revelation 12 is that evil isn't winning. The devil is doing as much harm as he can in the time he has left because he has already lost. It won't ease the suffering of someone caught up in war to hear that. We should never seek to make light of other people's suffering. But we have a hope to hold onto, that this is not all there is. When we have no hope, that's when we give up, we stop trying to fight against evil. Hope is what keeps us going. It gives us the courage to keep on choosing good rather than

evil, to choose to be on the side of Michael and his angels, to choose to belong to Christ, because, while we may find it hard to be caught up in the conflict, we know the war between evil and good has already been won.