

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*
SUNDAY SERMON

A sermon on St Michael

Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon on the 29th September 2019

If you were to glance at the booklists available from Amazon, you'd notice that "fantasy literature" is currently in vogue. These are books that retell old myths or invent new ones and there are a plethora of feature films about them. From King Arthur to Beowulf, from the Lord of the Rings to Harry Potter, they relate stories which, while they do not claim to be factual, nevertheless proclaim fundamental truths. Indeed, some truths can only be conveyed by fiction. As author Neil Gaiman once pointed out, "the point is not so much that fairy tales tell us that dragons exist, as much that dragons can be defeated".

That's not to say that some of the characters in the stories didn't have a basis in history. King Arthur, for example, was recorded by none other than the Venerable Bede in his work "The Ecclesiastical History of the English People", giving some basis upon which much of the fantasy folklore has been built, but most fantasy stories have their characters redrawn to accentuate a tendency in human nature. From Aesop's Fables to EastEnders, the purpose of fiction is to make us identify with the characters or to pass judgement on their behaviour. And in this way we learn how to behave when crises big or small confront us in our daily lives.

Today we are celebrating St. Michael and all angels and we've just heard the reading from the book of Revelation talking about a war in heaven with Michael fighting against the dragon and his angels, defeating them and throwing them out of heaven. Scary stuff. The Old Testament has similar apocalyptic tales. In the book of Daniel, the talk of angels is influenced by the fact that there were beliefs that every nation on earth had its own guardian angel, representing that nation before the throne of God in heaven. We read there:

At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people— everyone whose name is found written in the book— will be delivered.

If that's not enough to scare you silly, then I'm not sure what will. The archangel Michael is the heavenly representative of the nation of Israel who defeats the heavenly representative of Persia (who had held the Jews captive). Clearly, this is not a description of earthly events but it gives an eternal meaning to the struggle that is taking place on earth.

So do angels exist? Well, as Shakespeare pointed out, "There are more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of in thy philosophy". But that's not the important question. Because, from the Greek myths through Narnia right up to Doctor Who, the important thing to realise is that there's a struggle going on between good and evil. That's a fact, whether the story is fiction or not. And the struggle that you see taking place in your workplace, in your neighbourhood or on the international stage or in the church isn't just a local struggle. These conflicts all matter because they are all part of the cosmic struggle between good and evil.

The difficulty in talking about good and evil is that we polarize them. We look at them as black and white - right and wrong. The problem is that the threads of good and evil are frequently tangled, so that some actions may actually be partly good and partly evil - not so much black and white, but more a greyish colour. No one is completely good or completely bad. Often we are faced with a choice and we have to select the lesser of two evils. Indeed, often the evil we have to fight is within ourselves.

However, there really is a distinction between good and evil - we need to choose which side we are on. Our choices do matter. You may only be a Hobbit in the Shire or a trainee wizard at Hogwarts, but your little decisions can have long-term consequences. When you look back on your life, you may be able to say, "On such and such a day, I made a decision which changed my life. I didn't know it at the time, but now I can see why it mattered."

To illustrate, when I was coming to the end of my first year at university, I decided I would not move out into a student house with a group of friends, but would stay in Hall of Residence for a second year. Small decision. But as a result, I met a young first-year student I would never have met otherwise. She had long red hair....and the rest is history.

But take all of those small, seemingly unimportant decisions and add them up and the history of the world is changed. Their effects are multiplied, until we can see that we too have a part to play in the cosmic struggle between good and evil. So whether it's fact or fiction, to read that the archangel Michael defeated the Devil shows us that, even in seemingly trivial cases, choosing the good is important.

Because the decisions we all make, really do matter.