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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X32  
St. Michael and All Angels Evensong 19 (ES19)  
Thursday 28 September 2017

Genesis 28:10-17  
Psalm 103:19-22  
Rev. 12:7-12

### **John Milton, St. Michael and All the Angels**

*"Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser has been thrown down..." (Rev. 12).*

One of the first funerals I ever presided at was for a man who took his own life. I think so often about him and the many other funerals where I had the realization that the person who died had been carrying a burden that no one else knew about. What is the war going on inside you? What battles do you fight with yourself?

In 1667 at the age of fifty-nine the British poet John Milton (1608-1674) published his poem *Paradise Lost*, one of the masterpieces of the English language. Milton himself was a conflicted person. It was not easy to be married to him. He had become completely blind fifteen years earlier. He suffered a great deal of pain during the time he dictated the poem to the friends who wrote it all down. Let me give a very short summary of his story.

St. Michael wielding a sword that cuts even angels wounds Satan, the one known as "the Accuser." With his demons Satan falls through the vast gulf separating heaven from the abyss. There, he gathers his armies in hell and promises, "To wage by force or guile eternal war Irreconcilable, to our grand foe." God and the good are his enemies.<sup>1</sup>

Addressing his forces Satan says, "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n, / What matter where, I be still the same." He means that it does not matter if he stands in heaven or hell. What counts is what he takes with him. Satan goes on to say that he is jealous of God. He says that it is, "Better to reign in hell, than serve in heav'n."<sup>2</sup>

So Satan resolves to ruin God's creation in the way that a vandal might spraypaint a stained glass window or deface a beautiful work of art. He goes to Eve and Adam and tricks them into defying God. At first he seems to have succeeded and goes into hell to celebrate, but then he watches as each person in his army becomes a snake.

In the end St. Michael goes to Adam and Eve to remove them from Paradise. For the pair to survive outside of the Garden of Eden they will need wisdom. So he shows them all the things that will happen in the future up until the flood. Then he gives them this last advice.

“[T]hou has attained the sum of wisdom... only add / deeds to thy knowledge... add faith, / Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love, / ... called charity, the soul / of the rest: then wilt thou not be loath / To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess / a paradise within thee happier far.”<sup>3</sup> In only one way he seems to agree with Satan. That is, both believe that what you carry around in your heart is more important than where you are. The secret Michael shares with Adam and Eve is that we can bring heaven wherever we go. The goodness of heaven can be where we are.

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Michael and All the Angels. Michael is the opposite of the accuser. He brings wisdom, the larger picture of how life changes over time and this encourages us. In the same way he advises Adam and Eve.

An angel is a messenger. An archangel carries the highest message. The word angel is linguistically related to the Greek word euangellion which means good news. When our choir sings at evensong, on Sundays, or at concerts they bring good news.

But even more than that each of us has the chance to bring good news with our life. We can help people who are conflicted. Milton’s point is that this story is about you, about your inner life. Will you nurture thoughts that belittle other people so that you can feel superior? or will you bring hope wherever you go and build up the people around you? Can you be like St. Michael as a force of encouragement and wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* ed. Scott Elledge (NY: Norton, 1975) 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.