

Michael and All Angels

Revelation 12.7-12

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The camera pans back as our heroine climbs up step after step. We see she is on an island, a plug of granite that seems to erupt from the swirling ocean below. As she climbs, she passes what look like ancient stone igloos. She reaches the top. There is the man that she has travelled across galaxies to find. Here, on the site where the Jedi built their first temple, Rey steps forward. Luke Skywalker turns round. She stretches out her hand, and offers him his old lightsabre back.¹

That's the story at the start of one of the more recent *Star Wars* movies. And when the film-makers searched for the place that could serve as an other-worldly place of exile, they found it off the coast of Ireland. Seven miles off it, in fact, battered by the Atlantic winds and waves. And those film-makers were not the first people to find this an other-worldly spot. For 1300 years earlier, monks had sailed out to this wind-swept spot, and had built those same igloos (or, more precisely, *clocháin*) that the filmmakers depicted as Luke's home. For the monks, this was a place where they could dedicate themselves to prayer.

What is the name of this island? This is Skellig Michael. It is, as that Gaelic word '*sceilig*' means, a 'splinter of stone' that bursts out into the Atlantic ocean.² And it is far from the only place on the edge of our lands dedicated to St Michael, whose feast we celebrate today. Think of St Michael's Mount in Cornwall. Or Mont-Saint-Michel in Normandy.

Today we might visit them to marvel at their scenery, or to enjoy the historic architecture. But for the monks who settled on all three sites, the dedication to St Michael was no accident. For these were places, literally, on the edge of the known world. And the waters that they bordered were not places of play, but,

¹ <https://star-wars-canon.fandom.com/wiki/Ahch-To>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skellig_Michael: 'The island is named after the archangel Michael, with "Skellig" derived from the Irish language word *sceilig*, meaning a splinter of stone.'

as in the scriptures, a place of chaos. The seas were the uncontrollable deep, the dwelling place of great monsters like the Leviathan.

And so to come to these places was not to find some sort of quiet island hideaway. It was to go to battle, to be on the front line in the face of the forces of chaos that come crashing, wave upon wave, against human order, and dignity, and compassion.

And those monks called on Saint Michael in travelling to these places of chaos because he was, as we heard in the Book of Revelation, a warrior. 'War broke out in heaven,' John the author of Revelation tells us. 'Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.'

It is a dramatic scene. The devil is thrown down with his angels. And a loud voice from heaven celebrates the demise of the devil, and the triumphant faithfulness of the martyrs who have stayed faithful to the crucified and risen Lamb of God.

More precisely, it is an apocalyptic scene – which is to say, a scene written in the genre of apocalyptic that we find in a few bits of the Bible, but especially in the Book of Revelation. And the writer is here picking up a number of familiar stories – part of the Book of Daniel, some late Jewish writings, some Babylonian and Egyptian myths. And he or she is putting them all together to tell a new story. Through Christ – or, in the story, through the actions of Michael – the powers of darkness in this world – and not least the demonic Roman Empire – those powers have been defeated. We may not quite see that yet. There will be more Christians who will suffer and die for their faith. But even if there may be many battles still to fight, the war has been decided.

All this talk of apocalyptic battles may, from the perspective of our gently padded pews, seem as fantastical as Star Wars. But look at the front cover of your pew sheet.³ There is Michael the archangel, clad in armour. His statue stands in the centre of Kyiv, the city of which he is patron saint, above the gate which held back the Mongols during their Siege of Kyiv in 1240.



³ Image of St. Michael the Archangel , the Lach Gates, Independence Square, Kyiv

And it is hardly surprising that for many Ukrainians, those biblical images speak a very real truth. Days after the Russian invasion, one Ukrainian Archbishop put it like this: “We perceive today that the archangel Michael, together with the whole heavenly host, is fighting for Ukraine. ... Today we pray, ‘O archangel Michael and all the powers of heaven, fight for Ukraine! Cast down that devil who is attacking us and killing us, bringing devastation and death!’”⁴

Angels play many roles in the Bible. They are, first and foremost, messengers – like the angel Gabriel to Mary. They sometimes also appear as the chorus line in the great theatre of heavenly worship – like the throng of angels in Isaiah and Revelation singing those words of our Sanctus: ‘Holy, holy, holy; Lord God of hosts’. And, as we have dwelled on here, they are sometimes protectors – the figures who fight for the people of God against the powers of darkness.

And perhaps we need that sense that God does not just will our good, but is willing to fight for it. It speaks today to many Ukrainians. And perhaps it might speak too to us. To take one example: the idea of ‘guardian angels’ doesn’t feature much in the Bible. But it’s deeply embedded in the imagination of many, many people in Britain today. And that’s largely because – like that apocalyptic genre – it conveys meaningful truth.

What is that truth? Well, at the very least, the truth that there is someone out there – God, I want to say – who loves and cares for each one of us. God wants to guard us against our worst selves, and to be the people God calls us each to be.

But if that’s the only truth we’re after, then we end up with the slightly kitchy kind of guardian angel – the plastic figurine to place on your windowsill who offers us a general feeling of well-wishing.

I think we need to imagine our guardian angels differently. I see the invasion of Ukraine, and the catastrophe of our environmental inaction, and the way that the powerful and popular all too often abuse without consequences. It is a dangerous world out there. So I want my guardian angel to be more like a guard dog. And not a well-groomed German shepherd like I see wandering

⁴ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/april-web-only/michael-archangel-ukraine-kyiv-patron-saint.html>

contently through Battersea Park. I want my guardian angel to be like the guard dog that appears from nowhere when you try to walk through an unfamiliar farmyard – barking, growling, daring you to take one step further. If I have a guardian angel, that's what I want it to be like. And just occasionally, I might need St Michael, spear in hand, to step in and wield justice.

The world is full of light, but also of darkness. And I may trust that God loves and cares for me. But thanks be to God who will go the extra mile for us – and even, on the cross, to death.