

Parish of Mottingham St Andrew with St Alban

Rector's Pastoral Letter for Michaelmas 2020.

Dear Friends,

As I write this letter, London is just entering Tier 2 health and safety measures in the ongoing fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. What could be more relevant and empowering at this anxious time than the traditional Michaelic picture of the Archangel with his mighty spear overcoming the adversarial power of Lucifer, pictured in the Book of Revelation in the fallen form of a fearsome dragon? In spiritual battle with the dark adversary powers, Michael and his angelic hosts have traditionally been understood to play a crucial role. Those familiar with the high altar triptych at St Andrew's, Mottingham (which is a copy of an original work by Raphael's pupil, Perugino), might recall that the left-hand panel of this altar piece depicts this very battle. If one looks closely, it is clear that Michael is standing on the vanquished form of Lucifer, a glimpse of whose bat-like wing is just visible at the bottom of the canvass. This warrior image in the left panel is balanced by a charming depiction of Raphael, the Archangel of healing, in the right-hand panel. These contrasting forces of martial strength and gentle healing are just what are needed in the current health crisis, and it is wonderful that these archetypal themes are keenly focussed as one approaches the sanctuary and high altar at St Andrew's.

Michael may be seen as striking a telling blow for spiritual freedom, undaunted as he is by the forces of despair and darkness that Lucifer can muster. The Archangel's strength and defiance provide a fitting focus for inner picturing: that however dark the circumstances in the outer, material world may become, one can always, like Michael, draw strength of will from faith in Christ, protected by spiritual armour from the temptation to give up hope. In like measure, the gentle, healing forces represented by the Archangel Raphael, provide balm for the wounded soul and encouragement in the face of physical illness.

These complementary forces of spiritual strength and healing draw special power from Christ, whose image stands at the centre of the triptych. Just as Christ empowers and commissions his ministering angels, so he empowers and commissions us to be his agents of hope and healing in the world, if in prayer we turn to him and ask for the support we need.

As the infection rate for Covid-19 rises again, many in the NHS and emergency services, and indeed in service roles throughout society, will face great risks and challenges. In the face of such challenges, it is good to be able to draw upon hope-filled images that provide a counterpoint to all that seeks to sap or undermine our full humanity. Perugino's depictions of the iron will-power of Michael and the healing guidance of Raphael are just such pictures, animated as the Archangels are by the loving wisdom of Christ. In facing the grave challenges of present times, may we make time for prayer and meditation, drawing great comfort from the thought that, just as for his Archangels, Jesus Christ is the true source of strength and healing for all.

Wishing you and your loved ones health, safe-keeping and every blessing,

Ian

Revd Ian Welch

Rector, Mottingham St Andrew with St Alban

