

Revelation 12:7-12 | **Church Militant and Church Triumphant**

Daniel 10:10-14; 12:1-3 / Psalm 103:1-5, 20-22 / Revelation 12:7-12 / Luke 10:17-20

Preached on St Michael and All Angels, 29 September 2024 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch

Heavenly Father, send your holy angels to be with us, that the evil one may have no power over us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Church Militant and Church Triumphant

We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. One church. One people of God from all nations gathered around the Lamb who was slain. One band of saints marching throughout history in which the Gospel and the Word of God are faithfully enacted and the sacraments are celebrated according to God's command. That one church has been and will be persecuted, because it is at odds with the world, but it is united, one, in Christ, in his mercy, in his truth, in his love. One church, one faith, one Lord.

But there is a distinction that Christians have made in this one church, that there are two states of the church: the church militant and the church triumphant. Our own hymnbook observes the distinction, with a section of church militant hymns followed by a section of church triumphant hymns.

The church triumphant is the state of the saints in heaven. They've run the race, and so enjoy heavenly rest, crowned with glory. The church triumphant is at rest, because it is no longer contending against the devil and his powers. So, for example, one of the hymns we have in this section is 'For all the saints who from their labours rest'. We are united with them in the one church. We sing with them and are gathered with them at the eucharistic feast, and the book of Revelation also tells us that the saints in heaven are praying for us.

They're praying for us, because we are in the church militant, in the midst of a spiritual war. As we heard a few Sundays ago, we are to put on the armour of God to stand our ground against attacks (Ephesians 6). Our enemies are not ultimately flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities. The church militant are soldiers, under the banner of Christ, on guard against the devil who as a roaring lion is seeking people to devour, to take them away from the church, often in very subtle ways (1 Peter 5:8-9). So, for example, one hymn in this section of the hymnbook is 'A Mighty Fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon'.

The whole church, the church catholic is one, and even now we sing the hymns of the church triumphant, but our state, for the time being, is the church militant.

Angelic War

I've started with this distinction today, as a way of getting into our reading from Revelation 12:7-12, set down for this feast day of St Michael and All Angels.

For in that reading, we hear of an angelic war in heaven breaking out. On one side is St Michael and his angels, and on the other is the dragon, called also the Devil or Satan, and his angels. Both sides have angels, but some are fighting against God, some with him.

It's not immediately clear when this war was, and of course when talking about heaven, a place that is eternal, time is not something that easily applies. We do hear about this war in our other two readings. In Luke's Gospel, we heard Jesus say that he saw, or was seeing, Satan fall like lightning from heaven (Luke 10:17-20). It is something that he saw in the past. But then in our reading from Daniel in the Old Testament, we heard the prophecy that St Michael, introduced there for the first time, shall arise in a time of great anguish. While God's kingdom is eternal and outside of time, Christians sometimes speak of three times when the devil's defeat erupts into the earth's sphere. The fall of the devil at the beginning of creation with his presence in the Garden of Eden, the defeat of Satan by the temptation, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, and then the final victory at Christ's Second Coming.

All of these could be in view in our reading. But regardless of when this happened, our reading makes it clear that the angelic war is now over in heaven. For the dragon and his angels,

... were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

No longer is there any place for them in heaven, for the church triumphant which is at rest. The devil has been cast out of heaven, he has fallen like lightning. But, along with his evil angels, he is now on the earth, attacking the church militant.

Church Militant

This angelic war began in heaven, but it has spilled out onto the earth. For the losing side has come here. But throughout the Scriptures we also hear that the victorious angels are with us too. They are the angels that form a heavenly "host" or army, and who need to say "Fear not" when they appear to human beings, because evidently they are fearsome. Armies exist to fight, as the angels do, just as they also join us in worshipping and serving God, praising his name and joining with us in singing unending hymns of Holy, Holy, Holy.

And so today the church has set aside a day to remember the angels, and to thank God for the spiritual warfare that they engage in our behalf. And it's a strange kind of war, because the outcome is in no doubt and has already been declared. But the war is nevertheless real, and goes on.

Listen to what our reading says about the nature of this war, and the weapons that the devil and his angels use in their fight:

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven proclaiming,

"Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.

The power and the authority of Christ the King has already come. The angelic war was won not just with angels, but by the power of God Himself that is here declared. It was never a battle between equals. God, the Father almighty, and Christ the King, have prevailed. But it is as if here on earth, the

victory is still being made known, there are battles that still need to be mopped up. We still need the angels. We need them to join in our praise, but we also need them to protect us and fight for us.

For this passage also tells us that the chosen weapon of the devil and his demons is accusation. How does he seek to wage his war against the church militant, and against you? By accusing you. Tormenting your conscience. Accusing you of wrong-doing, of sin, of being deeply self-centred, lacking in love, lacking in faith, lacking in hope. Is the devil's accusation right? Is there anything to it?

When we seek to engage a spiritual war on the battlefield of our good works, of our own virtue, of our own ability to never let anyone down, to never fail God, then that is a battle we will lose. The devil's weapon of accusation has more power than our weapon of our own righteousness and perfection.

But the true spiritual war is not one that we fight alone, on the terms of our righteousness. It is Christ's righteousness which defeats the devil, and which today again covers us, as we receive the spoils of his victory, the forgiveness of your sins, and a communion in his holy body and blood. The whole book of Revelation starts with this proclamation, praising the one who "has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Revelation 1:5). And our reading today continues the theme. Let's listen to how our reading ends:

But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.
¹² Rejoice then, you heavens
and those who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you
with great wrath because he knows that his time is short!"

Cosmic Story - Our Story

He knows it. We know it. His time is short. But that doesn't make the war less real. We need the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of Christ's righteousness, the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God, the word of testimony. And we need the angels, who defend us, who lead us in adoration of the Lamb, whose blood is our sure safe weapon in the face of accusation.

In our lives we have many ways to define ourselves, and tell our story. The story of our family and children and relatives. The story of our careers and what we have produced. The story of our homes and neighbourhoods and particular communities. These stories are all important. But they take second place, to this primary cosmic story that we are a part of, and celebrate today.

Your names are written in the book of heaven, because God has called you into his one church by one baptism in one faith. And we live in hope, awaiting with great joy our entrance into the church triumphant. But for now it is the church militant for us. This is the great story that we are a part of, with angels and archangels fighting for us, with the saints in heaven praying for us. And with the blood of the Lamb who was slain, and has begun his reign, covering us, forgiving us, and leading us to our eternal home.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.