

## VICAR'S SEPTEMBER 2006 MESSAGE - Father Anthony Holder

### St. Michael, the Archangel - Our Patron Saint

I remember as a boy, the month of September was not one of my favorite months because it meant that it was time to prepare and return to school. Though I enjoyed school when I got there, it was always difficult to get into the mindset of returning to school after a wonderful nine week vacation of fun, sea and sun. Who wanted to go back to school after having such a wonderful time at home? Furthermore, in Barbados, there were no holidays during September that you could, at least, look forward to having a day at home. Any day off in that month meant that the island was either going to be struck directly or closely by a tropical storm or hurricane. But it is amazing how times change and as I often say God does have a sense of humor. September has moved from being one of my not-so-favorite months to being a very important month in my life. For the past twelve years, during this month, I mark the anniversaries of my ordination to the priesthood and the celebration of my first Eucharist on September 29th and 30th respectively. In some ways, I have been associated with the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels (September 29), called *Michaelmas* in England. Apart from my priesthood ordination anniversary, I was ordained in the Cathedral Church of St. Michael and All Angels and lived in the civil parish of St. Michael in Barbados for most of my life thus far. Now, I am serving here at St. Michael's Episcopal Church, O'Fallon, IL. What a co-incidence or God-incidence!

But who is this St. Michael after whom a feast day is named, churches all over the world bear his name, and the Egyptian Christians placed the Nile, their life-giving river, under his protection? Who is this St. Michael after whom a civil parish in the tiny island of Barbados is named and the Germans, after converting from paganism, re-consecrated all of their mountains to Michael?

MICHAEL, the archangel, is mentioned a few times in both the Old and New Testaments (the Book of Daniel, the Letter of Jude and the Revelation to John), having several distinctive roles in both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic tradition. He is said to be one of the four archangels whose names are mentioned in the Bible and who was chosen to stand beside God's throne. The other three archangels were Gabriel (who announced the imminent births of John the Baptist and Jesus to Zechariah and Mary respectively), Raphael and Uriel. The Archangel, MICHAEL, (Hebrew: *Mikael*) whose name means, "Who is like God?" is said to be heaven's greatest defender and mightiest warrior against evil and is considered to be the highest within the angelic ranks. He is seen as the archangel who records the names of persons who merit everlasting life and is the gatekeeper of paradise. He is said to be the intermediary who brought God's law to Moses and revelations of the future to Elijah and also the patron and defender of Israel against its enemies. However, only the last of these traditions can be substantiated by biblical evidence. He is considered the defender of the Church and is revered as the leader of the righteous angelic army who defeats Satan and his angels in Revelation 12:7-9. He is often depicted as wearing armor in the act of slaying the great Dragon of the Apocalypse (Satan).

Angels are not like the other saints on the Church's calendar who were all human beings. Angels are celestial beings created on a higher order than humanity. They are completely spiritual beings having intelligence and will and are personal and immortal creatures. Angels are the servants and messengers of God -- in fact, this is what the word "angel" means. Several different kinds (or ranks) of angels are mentioned in the Bible: angels, archangels, cherubim, seraphim, thrones, choirs, dominions, principalities, and powers. The scriptural records show that these are beings in creation who are pure in spirit and are created to praise God, to declare his plans to humankind, and to accomplish some of God's mighty acts. It is also clear that some of these created beings fell, and have become malevolent tempters and devils.

If we think of angels in the same way we think of aliens then they are beyond belief. They become absurd like the angel fortune telling cards you could buy in a bookstore. However, if angels are thought of as one of the mysteries of the created order that are just beyond our normal understanding, then they are not ridiculous, but take their place in the celestial beauty of the cosmos God has made and placed us in. The Christian view of angels has nothing to do with the cherubs on Christmas cards or the pictures Highway to Heaven or Touched by an Angel as sentimental as they may be. Rather the Christian understanding of angels is that the universe is charged with beings that we cannot see but who are forever praising God and standing ready to do his will. We sing this each Sunday in the Sanctus during the Eucharist, as we claim that our voices are joined with "Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven..." (BCP 362, 367,373)

As Michael sought to champion and defend the good of heaven, as a church that bears his name, we are also called to follow his example, seeking to champion the good for the sake of God's kingdom. We are called to be protectors and defenders, fighting against evil in all its various shapes and forms that exist in this world. We are called to be messengers of the gospel of Christ, bringing tidings to a world that is so much in need of it. We are called to be servants and not masters, stewards and not owners of the creation into which God has placed us. We are called to be co-workers with God in his creation and be guardians of the faith which we have received. Unlike Satan, who was once one of God's angels, our patron saint, Michael, recognized his role in God's kingdom and his relationship with God. May we, like him, recognize our relationship with God and to realize our role in God's kingdom, a kingdom which has already begun here on earth and which is still to reach its' fulfillment.