

THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA  
CEREMONY OF NAMING ST MICHAEL'S  
THE ST MICHAEL'S ORATION

1990

ST MICHAEL AND HIS MODERN ANGELS

# THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

Collins Street, Melbourne

Ceremony of Naming St Michael's

The St Michael's Oration 1990

Sunday 30 September 1990

## ST MICHAEL AND HIS MODERN ANGELS

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby CMG\*

### A HARD WEEK IN THE DIM COUNTRY

This was a very hard week for my colleagues and friends. The Bulletin published an extract of Barry Jones' speech to the National Ideas Summit. In it Mr Jones - a precious stirrer and shaker of our country - described Australia as "a dim nation"<sup>1</sup>. The real energy crisis, he declared, arose from Australia's abysmal lack of intellectual energy. Come to think of it, he could only name thirteen Australians whom he would describe as "intellectuals" and who are known to the community. People who regularly and publicly spoke out on ideas of relevance - ideas beyond the passing moment. Thirteen in a nation of seventeen million, he said, was a rather poor showing. His Excellency the Governor was one of Barry's thirteen - surely a Vice-Regal first. I was another.

I did not know whether to be flattered or insulted by my inclusion. The company was fine. But if Paul Johnson's recent book on The Intellectuals is to be believed, they are (as a group) no angels. In fact, they are rather selfish people with more than a dash of megalomania, indifferent to humanity and insensitive to those who have showed them human love. For this reason, and because only one other lawyer made the list, I have kept all copies of this week's Bulletin hidden from my colleagues. They are still smarting from the recent publication of my essay on "Breast Milk Substitutes and the Law". It caused one of the judges to say to me: "Kirby, is there nothing you will not speak about?"

Then came word that I had been invited to this Church when it was to be renamed St Michael. That I was to give the oration to St Michael. "Don't you think you're going over the top?", cautioned a modest colleague. "Surely those Melbourne people - who do not know you as well as we do - are not actually calling a Church after you?" He even asked if the blow of the Olympic Games decision had affected Melbourne's mental equilibrium.

"It is not after me" - I reassured him. "It is after Saint Michael - He who is like God." This intelligence left my judicial inquisitor none the wiser. We live in an age when few, even amongst those brought up in the Christian tradition, know the detail of scripture and of Church history. In both, the Archangel St Michael plays a heroic part. It is a part that makes him a Saint and an Angel for

our times. Humbly, I can say that I feel close to St Michael. Not because of my own dubious worth. But I was the first born of my parents' five children. In the dark hour of March 1939 following my birth, my father, then aged twenty-three, went to Greenway's famous Garrison Church of St James in Sydney. He offered thanks primarily for my mother's recovery from a difficult birth - even at my coming in I caused trouble. And looking up to a window of stained glass on the southern face of the Church he saw the bold visage of St Michael - the only Angel to have been made a Saint. That is how I got my name. It is not all that common for Australian people now - nor was it then - to be named, consciously, after a Saint. But I was. It is a naming that in childhood, and later on, has made me curious about that strong determined figure pictured in class with a sword. Let me tell you what I know of him - my Saint and I.

#### WHO IS ST MICHAEL?

There are not many references to St Michael in scripture. In the Old Testament, he is there in the Book of Daniel portrayed as a Prince.<sup>2</sup> Michael stands up, the great Prince. And he stands for the children of God's people especially in a time of trouble. And when is there not such a time in this age? In the New Testament the General Epistle of Jude<sup>3</sup> portrays him, an Archangel contending with the Devil. But he would not, even against the Devil, make a "railing accusation". He said that it was for "the Lord [to] rebuke thee".

It is in the book of Revelation - with its mysteries and allusions that we see but darkly - that Michael appears at his most brilliant. There was a war in Heaven is portrayed. Michael and his Angels fought against the dragon.<sup>4</sup> The dragon fought rallying his own Angels. But he prevailed not, and was cast out of heaven.

It is from this story that the tradition of the origin of Michael's name comes. When the war broke out in heaven the Archangels of the greatest courage cried out "Micha-El?", being in the Hebrew "who is like God?" "Who will rally to the side of God? Who in time of danger will show courage? Who will speak out? Who will do right? Who is on the good side?"

Only two other Angels are mentioned by name in the Bible: Gabri-El (the hero of God) and Rapha-El (God that healed). But Micha-El is the doer of these three. When the going gets tough, Michael is there to do battle on the Lord's side.

The Bishop of Newcastle, Bishop Holland, recently said that Australia was now virtually a "post-Christian society".<sup>5</sup> Whilst other divines of the Anglican Church expressed the view that this was being "a little pessimistic"<sup>6</sup> - note the word "little" - it is certainly sufficiently true that very few of us, brought up in the Protestant, Reformed or Lutheran tradition, nowadays know much about Angels. Yes. We know that the Angel of the Lord appeared unto Mary to announce the coming of Christ. We know

of the Christmas Angels who sing - sometimes in tune and in Department Stores - "Glory to God in the Highest". But who are the Angels? If we are going to name this Church after the only one of them to have been made a Saint - we had better familiarise ourselves with the company whom our Saint keeps. It is especially apt to do so today - not only for the renaming of this Church. But because this is the first Sunday after the Feast of St Michael and All Angels. St Michael, you see, is never alone. As Francis Macnab reminds, us he is always there with his helpers.

By tradition, Angels have not existed for all eternity. They too are created of God. They have that indefinable spirit of life. Yet they are much superior to ourselves and only after the Resurrection are we "equal unto the Angels".<sup>7</sup> There are very large numbers of them. By Christian convention, they are our examples. They worship God, just as the ancient words of the Te Deum remind us: "To thee all Angels cry aloud ... Holy, holy, holy". The word Angel is simply the Greek word for a "messenger". Thus Angels like St Michael, by the tradition of our Faith, bring us the messages of God. They relate us to the spirit that is in all life, no matter how humble and no matter how exalted. Valiantly, Angels like St Michael do battle against wrong. And they help humans - as ministering spirits: not content with the state of internal grace but determined to reach out; especially to those who are vulnerable or who are at risk.

It is little wonder that our Saint in such company should have had quite a following from the earliest time of the Christian era. In the fifth century, a cult grew up which saw St Michael as a healer and a helper. This cult received a strong impetus at the end of that century when the Pope saw an apparition of St Michael sheathing his sword above Hadrian's mausoleum in Rome.<sup>8</sup> This led to his unique canonisation. And all over Christendom, chapels of St Michael were built on the top of hills and mountains. As the austere landscape of Melbourne goes, the top of Collins Street is undoubtedly a high point. This is another reason why our choice in this Church is sound and true to a tradition of centuries.

Doubtless because of his sword, St Michael became the patron of Christian armies in the middle ages. Who knows what unpardonable cruelties were done in his name? Later by Church tradition, Michael was seen as the receiver of souls of the dead. The Black American folk song "Michael, row the boat ashore! Alleluia!"<sup>9</sup> incorporates a reminiscence about the function of St Michael: messenger, mediator, helper in times of trouble - a doer amongst the Saints and strong amongst the Angels.

#### WHAT HAS THIS TO DO WITH US?

But what has this to do with us? In Australia? In 1990? Out there in our busy world of trams and McDonald's parlours - a dim world if Barry Jones is to be believed - these allusions to scripture, Church history and Christian

tradition would be seen by many as completely and utterly irrelevant. Fairy stories to be kept for wide-eyed children who think of Angels as bird-like creatures: interminably plucking their harps, whose dress sense never went beyond the Roman toga. Relics of another age and another world. Why should a modern Church, with a modern mission, reach back to all these fantasies? What possible relevance do Angels and Saints - and the only Angel who became a Saint - have to us on this spring morning in Melbourne in a busy world?

The answer I would give is this. To understand ourselves we must study our past, reflect on our present and speculate about the future. To look into ourselves and question the continuity of life, its brevity and its absolute wordly termination in death - we do well to ponder on the traditions of the Christian community and the many virtuous people who have made it up for two millenia. We may not believe that St Michael has wings and is fluttering about over this Church as it adopts his name. But the spirituality which he represents - something more than the familiar workaday world - draws our minds away from the petty problems of the moment to the really big issues of life and death and the joys and burdens, rights and duties in between. From the traditions that have gone before, we can take inspiration.

Moreover, we may, if we choose, look upon the stories of the Angels and Saints as parables. They are allegories for us. But what lessons do they have for modern Australians?



The lessons I would derive are these:

1. There is a spiritual realm far above our worldly cares. You would probably would not be here if you did not know this and if your spirit were not seeking, out of curiosity or Faith, to explore that realm;
2. To get to that realm, led by the recounted conduct of Michael and All Angels, we worship God and remember our own mortality. We work against wrong and we help our fellows. That is what Angels traditionally do. We, who are not Angels, can try as hard as possible to aspire to journeying on a similar path;
3. We are not alone. Just as there are "ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands and thousands" of Angels<sup>10</sup>, there are many of us, optimists - people of the Book and of the Spirit - who are seeking to do our little bit for a better and more peaceful world. In this we are led, often, by seniors of the Church. Like Dr Macnab. Or Alan Walker who recently reminded us that the triumph of capitalism against communism should not blind us to the selfishness, indifference, cruelty and neglect of our own much vaunted market system.<sup>11</sup>
4. And in St Michael we have a doer. "Talkers are no good doers" said Shakespeare. So let us talk

but also act in the way Michael, spontaneously is said to have led the Angels into battle for the good side. In this Church, by its mission of outreach, talking is converted into action. The activities are almost numberless. All of them relevant to the society we live in: Youth workshops, seminars for kindergarten teachers helping them to cope, communicate and care for the young in their charge; the Different Drum programmes with discussion groups on the issues of our time. Weekend retreats for meditation and spiritual awareness that gives new strength to the participants.

5. Then it must be remembered, from the refusal of St Michael to condemn even the Devil, that it is the foundation of our religion that we seek love, reconciliation and mutual forgiveness. Faith. Hope. And Love. But the greatest of these is Love. We gain strength from judging not and from seeking to understand the great variety of humanity. To know is to understand. In this aspect of St Michael's tradition, this Church reaches out to those in special need. By a foster parents plan. By a suicide prevention programme. By help to those living with cancer or living with grief. By help to women recovering from alcoholism. By counsel to those

facing age and personal doubt. Just by listening: one of the twentieth century's lost skills.

6. And finally, from St Michael we take the message of courage. We may not take up a sword. But we speak up with courage and determination. We lift up our voices at things we consider wrong. The neglect of the aged. The predicament of street kids. Discrimination against patients with AIDS. Stereotyping of women. Indifference to the underprivileged. Cynicism in public life. Abuse of human rights abroad. War in the world.

So from the allegory of Angels, the lives of Saints and the good works and thoughts of fellow citizens we draw courage to Michael's question "who is like God?" The answer comes humbly back: "we are". For we have God's eternal spirit in us. What we make of that great gift is for each of us to decide.

Michael may not be above this Church with harp and sheeted robe. But the spirit of St Michael is here with us, all of us, on this special day and in this special Church.

#### FOOTNOTES

- \* President of the Court of Appeal of New South Wales; Chancellor of Macquarie University; Commissioner of the International Commission of

Jurists. Personal views.

1. The Bulletin, 2 October 1990, 34.
2. Daniel, x, 13 ff; xii, 1.
3. Jude v, 9.
4. Revelation xii, 7-9.
5. Quoted The Australian 4 May 1990, 4.
6. This is the reported view of Archbishop Peter Carnley, Archbishop of Perth, loc cit.
7. Luke, xx, 36.
8. Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 913.
9. Penguin Dictionary of Saints, 245. See also The New International History of the Christian Church, 657-8.
10. Revelation, v, 11.
11. Sir Alan Walker quoted in The Australian n5 above.