

Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



The East Window

Archangel Michael

Saturday in the Second Week of Lent

Reading: Daniel 10: 16-end, 12:1 -3

Again, one in human form (Michael) touched me and strengthened me. He said, 'Do not fear, greatly beloved, you are safe. Be strong and courageous!' When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, 'Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me.' Then he said, 'Do you know why I have come to you? Now I must return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I am through with him, the prince of Greece will come. But I am to tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth. There is no one with me who contends against these princes except Michael, your prince.

At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Commentary

It is not surprising that the Archangel Michael, Patron of our church, should appear in the East window. He is depicted with a military cape covering his armour, a sword, and a spear by which he has subdued the devil, 'that ancient serpent,' on which he stands triumphantly. Here is

Michael, the winged commander of the Army of God, the angelic leader of Heaven's forces in their triumph over the powers of hell.

Michael could also be represented as carrying weighing scales. Tradition says that Archangel Michael is present at the hour of death to accompany us on our journey to the afterlife. On the day of Judgement, it is Michael who will weigh the deeds of our earthly life: good one side, bad the other.

The Archangel is invoked during worship during the Offertory at Mass, as the priest blesses the incense. S/he may use the ancient prayer:

“Through the intercession of Blessed Michael the Archangel, standing at the right hand of the altar of incense, and of all his elect, may the Lord kindly bless this incense and accept it as a sweet- smelling savour.’

Michael is the only one that the Scriptures call an archangel (Jude 9). He was celebrated from early on in church history. One of the earliest and most famous churches dedicated to St Michael, the ‘Michaelion,’ was said to have been built in the 4th century by the Emperor Constantine, just north of modern- day Istanbul. It was a shrine associated with healing and protection. From then on, a devotion to Michael became popular throughout Europe – at Monte Gargano in Italy, Mont St Michel in France, Skellig Michael in Ireland, St Michael's Mount in Cornwall.

It is as protector of Israel that the Archangel Michael appears in the Book of the Prophet Daniel, which mentions Michael more often than anywhere else. In Daniel's last vision, an angel describes how the last

days will play out and it is at this time that Michael, ‘the great prince, the protector of your people will arise.’

Meditation

Churches dedicated to St Michael are often found on high ground and, in ancient times, in remote, westerly places. It was believed that in the west, where the sun went down, hostile powers lived that sought to harm humanity. Archangel Michael, as protector, could strive for human flourishing and banish the forces of darkness.

Our forebears, aware of the precariousness of life, had a strong awareness of the need for protection from what threatens to overcome a person. We are in need of protection ‘against every cruel, merciless power’ that opposes body and soul, said St Patrick.

Celtic Christians had many prayers and customs for calling on the protection of God, the most common being the ‘Caim’ or ‘Circle’ Prayer. It invokes the blessing and protection of the Holy Trinity over the circle of one’s family, friends, neighbours, colleagues and oneself.

Spend time asking for God’s protection and blessing on such a circle.

Circle me O God

Keep hope within

Despair without.

Circle me O God

Keep peace within

Keep turmoil out.

Circle me O God
Keep calm within
Keep storms without.
Circle me O God
Keep strength within
Keep weakness out.

Prayer

O Michael of the Angels
and the righteousness in heaven,
Shield thou my soul
With the shade of thy sword.
Shield thou my soul
On earth and in heaven.

From foes upon earth,
From foes beneath earth,
From foes in concealment,
Protect and encircle
My soul 'neath thy wing,
O my soul with the shade of thy wing.

*A prayer to St. Michael for protection from the Carmina Gadelica, collected
by Alexander Carmichael in the Gaelic-speaking regions of Scotland.*