

26th Sunday (B)

29th September 2024

‘Defend us in the day of battle’

Num 11: *If only all the people of God were prophets!* Ps 18: *from presumption restrain your servant*
James 5: *your wealth is all rotting!*
Mk 9: 38–48: *if your hand ... foot ... eye should cause you to sin ...*

Today, 29th September, is the feast of the Holy Archangels, angels who are specifically given names (or titles) in Scripture, *SS Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael*. Because this feastday is typically round about the the start of the academic year, many universities have traditionally had the name ‘Michaelmas’ attached to this term. Indeed the LSE only stopped calling this term ‘Michaelmas’ a year back. Sad that it has dropped it, because to have St Michael the Archangel stand at the head of this term — at the head of the *year* even — is a beautiful and powerful image. He, who is considered the ‘Prince of the Heavenly Host,’ and the slayer of that ancient foe the devil, can be for us a great patron as we head into the academic year strong in faith and needing the prayers of the saints and angels to ‘defend in the day of battle.’ May this St Michael’s Day, *Michaelmas*, be a day of great blessing as we start the year. We appeal to this great archangel of God’s holy service, St Michael, “who is like God,” to pray for our year as individual believers, and also together as a Chaplaincy, and to be at our side to keep us strong and holy in God’s service this whole year long.

We’ve such a rich selection of readings this Sunday. The words of St James about the use of riches and the care of the poor are particularly pointed. But let’s look, as the emphasis always should be, at the Gospel reading. Three major things jump out, for me, in today’s short Gospel passage: (i) not being negative about people who are trying to come to Christ; (ii) giving even the cup of water to a little one; (iii) making sure that we cut out of our lives the things that lead us to sin. Even in this short passage of teaching Jesus has something to say about (i) our personal love of God; (ii) the attitude to our immediate neighbour; and (iii) our practical charity. Our Lord’s challenge is never 1-dimensional, or just about how we can do practical good to others: it’s always about love of God *and* love of neighbour. Any and every passage of Our Lord’s message is in some way related to this basic double commandment: *love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul; and your neighbour as yourself*.

I want to focus on the latter part of the Gospel text, the third theme of those three that I listed: *making sure that we cut out of our lives the things that lead us to sin*. These are words that are maybe unsettling. They provoke us to what is not always an easy reflection, but is a necessary one for each of us

who takes seriously the desire to live a good life, a *holy* life. What should we be cutting out of our lives in order to save us from sin? *If your hand should cause you to sin, cut it off ... or if your foot should cause you to sin ... or if your eye should cause you to sin ...* Jesus is using graphic imagery about the severing of limbs; that's to get us to listen up! Clearly He's not actually advocating self-mutilation — that in itself would be a grave sin against one's own body, 'temple of the Holy Spirit' — but He certainly *does* mean in a serious, sober way that we do need to eliminate things that do us harm spiritually.

Some years ago, when I moved from Enfield to Poplar, having previously been in a Presbytery with a communal TV, I brought my own TV out of storage and started watching it again ... but after only a week or so I decided I had to "cut it out." I put it back in its box and put the box back in the cupboard. Why? Because I was watching it far too much, far too late, and being tempted to watch stuff that wasn't decent. Since then I have never watched live TV on any regular basis — I try instead to watch things of my own specific choosing online on the *iPlayer*, and to choose decent programmes only. This is just one example, and it doesn't mean to say that I have succeeded in being good at this every time ... but on that occasion I did

manage to put Jesus words into practice: to cut something out that was unhelpful to my spiritual life. It was a moment of grace, ... and we all need those much more often. So, in response to Jesus, what is it that we need to cut out at this time? What do we know is causing us to sin, or tempting us to sin? In a moment of silent prayer let's ask the Lord to give us the grace to see what that might be, and the courage to act on it ...

Maybe I can make some suggestions, too, that might help us to act in conscious response to Jesus's clear directive. I have 4 topics: *alcohol, music, friends, and phones* ... I don't mean, of course, that we cut out of our lives alcohol, music, friends, and phones — I mean, what would be left??!! — but I do mean that there may be elements of these that we need to address.

(i) **Alcohol.** For many students, alcohol is the fuel of socials and that's fine. We have a Newman House bar here ourselves. And for many, myself included, alcohol has never taken on a life of its own — it's just never been a huge part of my family or my own life; but it's also true that for some it can be a tricky area of life to navigate, and hard to control. Maybe it's good to flag this up at the start of the academic year, as the extensive misuse of alcohol can lead us into all sorts of other areas of sin

through loss of inhibitions and lack of control posing a danger to oneself and maybe to others. If you find you're having difficulty controlling your intake of alcohol, or getting drunk regularly, then ponder on Jesus's words, if such-and-such causes you to sin, cut it out. No easy task with a drug like alcohol, but counsellors and professionals are always available to help. *Better to enter into life sober, than drunk and risk one's very life.*

- (ii) **Music.** I can't say that I'm any expert in modern (pop) music, and I'm only an occasional user of *Spotify*, but when I do dip in to the contemporary world of pop music, I find that there is a not-insignificant stream of pretty worrying lyrics. Of course there is plenty of wholesome music by contemporary bands and artists to choose from, but the presence of truly evil themes, employing very crude words and ideas that are 'from the dark side,' seems also to be a big part of the music scene. Sometimes I have been very shocked by reading the lyrics of modern songs, and I urge you to be extra-vigilant in what you are letting in to your soul through your ear-buds and air-pods. Have a think about this, and if there are singers that you need to cut out of your

playlist, then do so. *Better to enter into life de-Spotified, than to have an ultra-contemporary playlist and risk one's very soul.*

- (iii) **Friends** ... are the very lifeblood of a happy life! Our friends are one of the most valuable blessings that we gain at university. And it is worth investing quality time with them, as it may well be that the basis of lifelong friendships are laid down in these university years. I know that that was the case for me. Some of our closest friends will undoubtedly be Catholic believers like ourselves; many may not be ... but I think that it's worth remembering that a friend, whilst having his or her right to disagree with us — or, for that matter, debate with us and probe our beliefs — does not have the right to ride roughshod over our faith. So, there may be times when a friend needs to be reined in, asked that they respect our faith, and to love us as we are, Catholic believers striving to follow Jesus. A friend who will not respect our having an active belief in Christ is not a friend to the whole of our person, but is only loving a part of us. Please God they will come to accept the whole of us, and see the blessing that our faith is, that it colours and enriches and

makes beautiful the person we are. Occasionally, and sadly, if a so-called friend is determined only to undermine and belittle our faith, there may have to be a parting of the ways. *Better to enter into life one friend down, than to have one's whole faith in Jesus relentlessly battered and beaten down.*

- (iv) **Phones.** Well, there's far too much to say! Probably if we were honest we'd nearly all have to own up to a need to 'cut out' time wasted on our phone! Let's make use of all the available helps we can to limit our screen time, and not spend half our precious, exciting, opportunity-laden university years doom-scrolling on our phone, or, worse, viewing immoral material. Many years ago I took the decision — again, I think it was an explicit response to today's Gospel imperative — to *leave my phone in another room* when I went to my bedroom at night. I still do that, so that my bedtime is completely free from the temptation to stay up for hours viewing the internet. For most students in single-room university accommodation, that's not so easy, but for those of you who do live at home, or in houses with multiple rooms, I suggest you think long and hard about distancing yourself from the

phone at night, and even for significant parts of the day: partly for your sleep; partly for your mental health; partly to help you avoid the most insidious temptations of pornography. Your life, and your university life, is worth more than your phone-life, and Jesus can help make it so! Better to enter into life with fewer social-media 'likes' than to have lost your entire life to your phone.

I want to end with a famous prayer, often said at the end of Mass, or at the end of the Rosary — the prayer to St Michael for protection. I offer it for us all at Newman House, that the prayers of this holy warrior and heavenly protector may guard us and galvanize us into pruning our lives to make them more take on the shape of Jesus Christ. May he help us have the courage to *cut out of our lives* the things which we need to ... May he pray for us to know what those things are, and have the grace to fulfil that exercise, pruned so as to prepare ourselves for heaven:

HOLY MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL, defend us in the day of battle. Be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God, thrust down to hell Satan and all the wicked spirits who wander through the world for the ruin of souls. Amen.