

**The Thomas Herbert Sermon for the Michaelmas Feast delivered by
The Reverend Matthew Jones, Chaplain of St Thomas Becket Anglican Church,
Hamburg, at The Merchant Adventurers' Hall, York, 26 September 2013**

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Firstly, I would like to say what a great honour it is for me to have this opportunity to preach this historic sermon in this historic setting. As an Australian, I find it quite overwhelming to be in a building that is over 650 years old. In my last parish, I was the Rector of a parish which had stewardship of the oldest Anglican Church building in the Diocese of Brisbane. In 2009 the building celebrated its 150th anniversary. This will give you some indication of how I am grappling with the concept of such an old building, and how many lives have been connected with this place in six and a half centuries. It is indeed a privilege and an honour for me to be here tonight.

Secondly, I would like to be so bold as to begin the text of my sermon with a question. Have you ever considered the similarity between St Michael and his Angels and the Merchant Adventurers? I would like us to explore this question a little this evening.

The Feast of St Michael and All Angels, which we also call Michaelmas, is a great occasion to celebrate in the church. The reading we have heard this evening from the Book of Revelation (Rev.12:7-12) sets the scene for this wonderful event, and I can't help but feel this has great significance for those who have connections to the Merchant Adventurers who are sitting here this evening. Why do I think this? Well, let me try and explain.

The story begins with a declaration: 'War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they 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 world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.'

When I read this passage, it says to me that Michael started the war. He saw what was happening and took steps to try and stop it. He was not deterred by the fact that he might lose his life in heaven and be cast out – he fought on trusting that God would give him the strength that he needed. This so inspired his followers, his angels, that they fought bravely too, and together, by the grace and strength of God, they overcame the danger and were victorious.

This is where I see a parallel to the Merchant Adventurers. The early Merchant Adventurers sailed the seas looking for rare and exotic treasures to bring back to help build up their businesses. Given that we are talking about the 14th and 15th centuries, sailing was far riskier than it is today. However, these courageous adventurers plied the seas, risking their lives, and succeeded. Their courage must have been inspiring because they continued to find plenty of crews to help sail the ships and they went year after year exploring many uncharted waters. Again, as an Aussie, I find this so inspiring because much of this took place 300-400 years before white settlement came to Australia. In the 18th century, several ships were lost en-route from England to Australia so I can only guess that the risks were even greater for sailors in the 14th and 15th centuries.

So where does this courage come from and why is there a similarity between St Michael and the Merchant Adventurers?

The Book of Revelation says that Michael and his angels were victorious because 'They have conquered the dragon 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.' They trusted God. The Merchant Adventurers were successful because they courageously sailed forth, not clinging to life, but being prepared to risk life for the adventures that lay ahead.

The Merchant Adventurers were a religious fraternity who were guided by God. I see a great similarity here. Why else would an organisation like the Merchant Adventurers build such a magnificent hall, if not to do God's will? The hall was built to transact their business affairs, to meet together socially, to look after the poor and to pray to God. For me this a great testimony that the Merchant Adventurers were people of faith who were prepared to go into unknown places, trusting in God.

Prior to ordination, my background was in Business Management and Marketing. I must also confess that, prior to 2011, I had not heard of the Merchant Adventurers. I must also confess that, since 2011, I have been quite fascinated by them. To be a successful merchant, one needs to have an edge on the competition. If we look at the way products are marketed, it is usually the 'benefits' that are not found in the competitor's products that are emphasized in the advertising. In Australia, the two major fast food hamburger outlets are McDonalds and Hungry Jacks. Hungry Jacks' advertising slogan was 'The burgers are better at Hungry Jacks'. Whether that is true or not I will let others decide but it is a positive claim, made boldly and said often. The seed gets sown in the mind of the consumer. The subtle message cannot be missed – no matter how good the other burgers are, 'ours' are better!

I could imagine that it was this drive to always find something newer and better that compelled the Merchant Adventurers to travel the seas as they did. They were not content to sit and wait for others to bring new discoveries home – they went in search of them. The catch phrase in the business world to describe this is 'proactive'. To be proactive, rather than reactive, is often the difference between being a leader in the industry or a follower, the difference between succeeding and failing.

In this same way, St Michael was proactive. He was not content to sit back and allow the dragon to continue to carry out such evil, destructive acts. Michael gathered his angels and proactively went into battle. He sought out his opponent and courageously faced him, not fearing death or failure, but trusting God and giving his all. This paid off and Michael and his angels won the victory.

A little closer to home for me and there is another shining example of courage in the city of Hamburg. In the early 1600's, the Merchant Adventurers approached the very German and very Lutheran Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg and requested church services to be conducted in the English language. Not only in English, but also according to the rites of the Church of England! Probably not surprisingly, this request was initially refused. However, not to be put off, the Merchant Adventurers persisted (and for want of a better word, negotiated) and in 1611 permission was granted.

In 1612, the first English language church service using the Church of England rite was celebrated in Hamburg. Over time, this community became known as The English Church and

later adopted Saint Thomas Becket as their patron saint. Last year in 2012 we celebrated the 400th anniversary of The English Church in Hamburg and it was a great joy to welcome several members of the Merchant Adventurers to the special 400th Anniversary Service of Thanksgiving at which Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, Bishop of Gibraltar in Europe presided. Once again we see the fruits of being proactive. The vision and courage of the Merchant Adventurers in wanting a place of worship where people could gather for prayer and religious nurture in their native language became a reality. I sometimes wonder how many thousands of people have benefitted from this initiative over the past four centuries.

Since my appointment as Chaplain, to what we now call the Englische Kirche – The Anglican Church of St Thomas Becket, we have had many reasons to celebrate. I began in September 2011 and in that time we have not only celebrated our 400th anniversary but we also took part when Hamburg hosted the Kirchentag (Church days) when hundreds of thousands of Christians came to Hamburg for an intense five day Christian experience. Immediately following the Kirchentag we began the restoration of the exterior of our beautiful neo-classical building. After much fund-raising, and lots of networking, we successfully raised the 170,000 euros needed to completely restore the exterior, as well as put up a new sign (the old sign was destroyed in the bombings of 1943 and was never replaced in the ensuing seventy years) as well as illuminating the sign, the cross, the four street facing windows and the front portico. All of this was dedicated on 10th September at a special gathering to say thank you to God and our supporters who helped to fund this enormous project.

Here is another example of being proactive and going out in search of what is needed for the success of the mission. Following in the example of the Merchant Adventurers, we sought out the resources that would enable us to best 'market' the church.

Our next big challenge will be to increase our operational income. Funding for projects such as building restoration cannot be used to pay day to day expenses such as heating, electricity, telephones and Chaplain's stipends. The parish has been struggling since 2009 and we have an enormous task ahead of us to find creative ways of increasing our income in a world facing many economic challenges. This is partly why I am so fascinated by the Merchant Adventurers. They faced enormous challenges in a constantly changing world and sought creative ways to face them. So too will we at St Thomas Becket Hamburg. By the grace of God, we too will meet this challenge and succeed.

In closing I can think of no better quote than the words of the famous American author, Mark Twain:

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

Amen.