



**Rupert Lang's 30th Anniversary
Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver
Feast of St. Michael and All Angels
September 25th 2016**

Sermon by Bishop Michael Ingham

One of the most enduring difficulties for Christian faith is the problem of evil. Put simply, it's this. How can a good and omnipotent God have created a universe in which there is so much pain, sorrow, and undeserved suffering? Does not the existence of so much human travail in fact deny the existence of God?

The Greek philosopher Epicurus put it succinctly:

If God is willing to prevent evil, but is not able, then God is feeble.
If God is able, but not willing, to prevent evil, then God is malevolent.
If God is neither able nor willing, then God is not God.
If God is both able and willing, then whence cometh evil?

The question has endured throughout time. It's a question for all religions. One of the earliest Christian attempts to answer it occurs in the Book of Revelation, in a passage normally read on the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels:

"There was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and his angels. Satan, the deceiver of the world, was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him."
(Revelation 12: 7-10)

This ancient myth – for it is a myth – was a way of rescuing the intellectual problem. Evil is not the design or intention of God, but the result of rebellion against God. Humans have not created evil but must suffer from it. The origins of evil lie in heaven and from heaven, therefore, must come its defeat.

For some reason I don't understand, why we've chosen today, and this story of war in heaven, to celebrate Rupert's 30th anniversary! To my mind, war and Rupert do not belong in the same thought. Rupert, as we all know, is a mild-mannered fellow, shy, introverted, and brilliant. Perhaps it's because our story today features angels – but that really doesn't work either, does it?

He came to us in 1986 after graduating from the University of Manitoba, the Royal School of Church Music in England, and the University of Cambridge. He had already founded the Vancouver Children's Choir, which he still directs. In the next 30 years he took the Christ Church Cathedral Choir on to win the CBC National Amateur Choral Competition four consecutive times. In 2006 the Cathedral choir also took the prize for Best Performance of a Canadian Choral Work.

Rupert is more than a director of choirs. He is one of Canada's leading composers of choral works. His range of composition is broad and eclectic. Not for Rupert the rigid straitjacket of traditional or classical church music such as you find in many cathedrals. When I first met him he had written the *Missa Terra Nova* – Mass for a New Earth – which employed the soaring and majestic sounds of a moog synthesizer blasting through the audio speakers of this Cathedral. When he first played it, sitting at this weird electronic keyboard at the back of the church, one of the parishioners, Mary Patrick (God rest her soul), walked back to him and said "Turn that damned thing off!"

Rupert is not so mild-mannered as he might seem. When you try new things in church music you have to have a spine of steel. Standing up to parishioners is one thing. Standing up to the clergy is another thing altogether.

One of the most enduring wars in church history has been between clergy and church musicians, each determined to control the liturgy. There have been many sordid battles. Some years ago I had lunch with the former organist of Westminster Abbey in London. He had played at the Queen's Coronation in 1952. I asked him about some of his experiences with priests. Do you prefer the clergy to be musical or not? I enquired. "My boy" he said "it doesn't matter whether the clergy are musical or not. What matters is that they know which they are!"

Fortunately for us, and fortunately for Rupert, this has not been a problem here. There has been an extraordinarily good working relationship between him and the Cathedral deans. In the planning and preparation of liturgy, music is always selected to enhance and deepen the themes of worship. Rupert's range of interest, from classical to contemporary, from western to African and Latin American, always supports and elevates the spiritual atmosphere so essential to beautiful liturgy.

Music is an integral part of deeply satisfying worship. It requires a remarkable combination of spiritual elements to draw back the veil between the human and the divine and to usher in the presence of God. I believe more people have been brought to faith by music than by the words of preachers. If that is true, then we should think of our church musicians as evangelists in a real sense. They make possible a glimpse of transcendence. They prepare us for a moment of ineffable experience.

In the first reading today we have another ancient story. Jacob the patriarch lies down to sleep, and has a dream. It's a dream of angels travelling between earth and heaven, and the voice of God speaking to Jacob promising prosperity and well-being to his nation for all generations to come. When Jacob awakes he says "How awesome is this place. This is none other than the House of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Genesis 28: 17)

Rupert will be embarrassed if I say – but I do want to say – that the music in this Cathedral over the last 30 years has enabled many people to murmur in the quiet of their hearts – this is the house of God. This is the gate of heaven.

It was here once, in the dead of night, that Rupert came in search of an answer. He had been commissioned to compose a piece of music for Chor Leoni to be performed on Remembrance Day. As the day drew nearer, Rupert's creativity abandoned him. No muse spoke. God was silent. In a certain anxiety of spirit, he let himself into the building, long after midnight, and sat alone at the piano.

He picked up a prayer book. The pages fell open to the funeral liturgy, and his eyes saw the words "Give rest unto your servants with your saints, O God, where there is neither pain nor sorrow, neither sighing but life everlasting." And in a moment of epiphany the music came to him. Today we have one of the most beautiful and timeless compositions ever to emerge from this place. Rupert's gorgeous Kontakion is now performed all over the world.

It's not all been piety and transcendence, however. There was the time when the organ bench collapsed whilst Ed Norman was sitting on it and the Bishop of Texas was down here trying to preach. Among Rupert's many talents, mechanical engineering is not one of them. Nothing was more memorable that night than the sight of two renowned organists attempting to wrestle a broken bench together while one of them was on the floor trying to play the foot pedals with his knees, while the other's hands were on the keys above his nose!

And then there was the famous occasion of the inauguration of the new and expensive Christ Church Cathedral organ. It was a blue chip affair with

dignitaries from all over the place. Rupert had invited a world famous organist from one of those swanky churches in Manhattan to play a concert on the new instrument, to showcase its vast musicality and stunning pipes.

Unfortunately, during construction, one of the organ builders had left a piece of wire lying about that eventually found its way into the keyboard. It wedged itself between two keys, making one of them stick in the 'on' position. The result was a sound I can only describe honestly as a fart that kept intruding into the performance. Rupert had to sit next to the guest on the bench to keep lifting up the downstuck key.

They tried to make repairs during the concert intermission, but were unsuccessful. And so the guest musician began the second half by apologizing that he couldn't play the major piece of the evening. The key that was stuck was an 'F' and the piece he was scheduled to play was a long and rousing piece – in the key of F. At that point, he could have played something from Monty Python!

I asked Rupert just recently what was his best moment in the last 30 years. He said it was the day he was offered the job in 1986. He hadn't expected to get it. He was young and unknown and up against other more established applicants. It's typical of his humility, and even his occasional self-doubt, that he would not count himself worthy of such an opportunity.

But the Cathedral saw his talent, and sensed his potential. That was three decades ago. He is no longer unknown. He is no longer young. But he remains a rare and unique talent. He has opened our hearts to God in a way few others are able. He has enriched our lives. His name shall be honoured here as long as this Cathedral stands.

God bless you, Rupert.