



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Tale of Father Aitch and the Archangel

A Children's Christmas Story,

Christmas Eve, December 24th, 2013

With apologies to Charles Dickens, Ebenezer Scrooge and the Archangel Gabriel

Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a little town just outside Baltimore, there lived a very grumpy old parish priest called Father Aitch. If you asked him why he was so grumpy, he would be very upset: "I'm not grumpy," he would tell you, "I just like things to be done right,"

The trouble was that nothing ever seemed to be done right in his church – at least in Father Aitch's opinion. "Look at those flowers!" he would grumble, "What a mess they make!" He banned singing because he didn't like music. Most of all, he disliked children because they were always running about and knocking things over. "They need to be spanked," he would say, "Children should be seen and not heard!"

Father Aitch's grumpiness and grumbling made life very difficult for his congregation. They tried very hard to please him – to make the church look pretty, to sing nicely and to keep the Sunday School children as quiet as possible – but nothing was ever quite good enough for Father Aitch. He would simply scowl, put his hands on his hips and say: "You're going to have to do a lot better than that if you want to get to heaven."

These days, of course, congregations wouldn't put up with priests who behaved like Father Aitch. But back in those days there weren't such things as motorcars and buses. Getting around was much more difficult than it is today. Most people had to rely on their own two feet to go places, except for a very few lucky ones who owned horses and buggies.

Not only that – churches were few and far between so if you parish had a priest like Father Aitch you simply had to like it or lump it.

Things might not have been so upsetting if Father Aitch had been just a teeny bit less grumpy at Christmas time. But he wasn't. Sad to say, at Christmas time he was even more grumpy than usual. There wasn't a thing that his parishioners liked that Father Aitch liked.

"No! No! No! I will not have those messy decorations cluttering up my church," he told them. "And get rid of that awful manger scene. It makes the place look like a playschool. And don't bother suggesting that the Sunday School children should sing carols. They can't carry a tune in a bucket."

Father Aitch's Christmastide grumpiness made everybody in the parish very unhappy, but they just didn't know what to do about it. In the end it was the one of the Sunday School children who came up with the best idea.

"Jesus said that whenever two or three of us are gathered together he will listen to our prayers," he said, "There's an awful lot more of us than two or three, so lets pray that God helps Father Aitch to become a whole lot more cheerful." So that's what they did – all the way through Advent.

But despite all their prayers nothing much seemed to happen. In fact on the Sunday before Christmas, Father Aitch was even grumpier than ever. That night Father Aitch got ready for bed as usual. He changed into his bright red nightshirt, put on his night cap and knelt down to say his prayers.

"Lord," he said, "We are ready to celebrate your dear Son's birthday. But please stop my congregation

from making a mess of my church and do stop those hideous Sunday School kid from screeching carols. Amen.” With that, he blew out his beside candle and jumped into bed,

Just as he was about to close his eyes, however, Father Aitch realized there was still light in the room. What’s more, it was getting lighter and lighter. A misty glow in the corner was growing bigger and bigger; taking on the shape of a very tall man, dressed in flowing robes. On his back were white, feathery wings.

“Fear not, Father Aitch,” said the man, holding up his hand. “I am the Archangel Gabriel. And I’ve come to teach you about the meaning of Christmas.”

“Very nice of you, I’m sure,” said Father Aitch, “But it’s my congregation that needs to learn about Christmas. So off you go, and don’t drop any of your feathers on the floor on the way out. I just swept it this morning”

But the Archangel was not taking “no” for an answer. “Sorry, Father Aitch,” he said, “It’s you the Holy Ghost sent me to fetch, and I’m going to take you on the ride of your life.” With that, he grabbed Father Aitch by the collar of his nightshirt, hauled him out of his bed, through the window, and off into the night.

Poor Father Aitch was terrified. “Put me down, put me down,” he pleaded. “Don’t worry, Father Aitch, I won’t drop you.” said the Archangel Gabriel, “Just relax and enjoy the flight.”

Father Aitch didn’t have much time to relax. In no time they were descending fast, landing in what looked like a farmyard, crowded with people of all shapes and sizes.

“Where are we?” quavered Father Aitch, “And what are all these people doing here?”

“I’ll show you,” said Archangel Gabriel, grabbing Father Aitch’s hand and shouldering his way through the crowd and into what turned out to be a stable. But it was a stable decorated in a way Father Aitch had never seen before. It was hung with branches of green pine trees, ivy and holly with red berries

There were animals, of course: A large black ox, a little grey donkey and a host of flock of sheep and

lambs. But mostly it was packed with all sorts of people: farmers, shepherds, shopkeepers and their wives and children – all of them gazing awestruck at a gray-haired man with a beard, his young wife and a baby lying in a manger.

Far above them, high in the sky, a choir of angels sang: “Glory to God in the highest. Peace on earth. Good will to all men.”

Father Aitch fell to his knees. “This is Bethlehem,” he said to the Archangel. “This is Bethlehem on that first Christmas Day. There’s Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus in the manger.”

“Welcome to Bethlehem, Father Aitch,” said St. Joseph. “We hope that you’ve learned what Christmas is about.”

“Oh yes, sir,” replied Father Aitch, “I can see there’s no place for grumpiness in the Church. Jesus wants people to be happy at Christmas. It’s the celebration of his birthday and all that it means to us. It should be happiest time of the whole year, but my grumpiness has made it the most miserable for my poor congregation.”

“Well, it’s never too late to turn over a new leaf,” said St. Joseph, kindly. And when the Archangel had taken him back home that is exactly what Father Aitch did. The very next morning, he jumped out of bed, harnessed his buggy and went to the forest to cut all manner of decorative greens and holly.

When people arrived to get the church ready for Christmas they were amazed to learn that he wanted it decorated with all the greenery he had collected. And they were even more overjoyed to learn Father Aitch wanted every one to help the Sunday School sing as many carols as possible. Afterwards, everybody agreed it was the best Christmas they’d ever had.

And it wasn’t long before people actually dropped the nickname “Grumpy Old father Aitch” and started calling him Jolly Old Father Aitch. In fact, in the end, they completely forgot that he’d ever been grumpy at all.

The End