

## 1990: ST. MICHAEL'S CONFERENCE SERMON

*Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. (Luke. 3:1 & 2)*

I have always wanted to begin a sermon by quoting the beginning of the third chapter of St. Luke's Gospel. St. Luke uses the reigns of three tetrarchs, two high priests, a Roman Governor, and the Emperor himself to indicate the time when the word of God came to John the Baptist in the wilderness. The word of God came to John the Baptist who understood it and preached it boldly. The Word of God also met John the Baptist as he stood along the banks of the Jordan River, and this Word of God is Our Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that Holy Scripture is "God's Word Written" (Article 20, p. 706, Prayer Book) . We also believe that Our Lord Jesus is the Word of God Incarnate. ("And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." John 1:14) We believe that the theme of God's word written is the Word of God Himself "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man".

Those of us who are ordained deacons and priests are ministers of the Word. We proclaim the word audibly (for your hearing) in our reading and preaching of the word, and we show forth the word made visible in the sacraments of the church. Whether our ministry as deacons, priests, and bishops is valid and at all useful depends on one thing...it depends on whether we are true and faithful to The Word.

Although you might not be ordained, you are also ministers of the word because you are members of the church, and the church is the "witness and keeper of God's Word Written". We have held this conference in order to help you grow in your role as witnesses and guardians of the word. Our courses: Introduction to the Bible, Introduction to God, Old Testament Prophets, and Revelation, helped us consider God's word in a quite direct way. The courses: Called to be Saints, and The Ten Commandments, showed us how to live a life based upon God's word. The courses: The Prayer Book as a System of Prayer, Possession or Sanctification, and The Sacrament of Love, showed us how the Word of God may dwell within us and so shape our souls as to enable us to love what we know to be true. We must not forget our course on The Holy Trinity. When the Word of God works within our soul uniting what we love and what we know to be true, we become more and more the image of the God who is perfectly united and perfectly at rest in love and peace, the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We have all attended this conference in order to grow in the word. It has been our privilege as members of the staff to offer courses on the topics I've just mentioned. I hope you realize how thankful we are to be able to do this. Most of us parish priests find that although we are ministers of the word, and the church is the witness and keeper of the word, the one thing which we have great difficulty getting people to read and study is the word. You "Michaelites" have just allowed us to spend a week teaching and discussing the word, and this is something for which we are grateful. It is such a pleasure to be here with you that I fully expect to attend at least one of these conferences at which the clergy actually outnumber the campers. Thank you for being such an encouragement to us by your faithfulness and by the way in which you are growing in the word.

Our Conference is named for St. Michael the Archangel. St. Michael is a symbol of victory over evil. St. Michael fought the devil, that old serpent, and cast him out of heaven. Our Epistle lesson tells us that St. Michael won the battle. It doesn't tell us exactly how he won the battle. We hear nothing about the sort of "weapons system" employed by St. Michael. However, St. Jude, in his Epistle, gives us a glimpse of the method used by St. Michael in defeating the devil. St. Jude writes: "Michael, the Archangel, when contending with the devil...did not bring against him a railing accusation, but said: the Lord rebuke thee." (Jude, 9) St. Michael defeated the devil with the word...the Word of God, a sharp, two-edged sword.

The church in every age battles against the forces of evil both outside and inside her walls. We are all engaged in this battle. There are no civilians in this spiritual war. If you refuse to fight, or are slothful and lazy and ignorant and selfish, you are in fact actively fighting for the other side. You are, in one way or another, on the front lines of this battle. So, as St. Paul says to Timothy, "let no man despise your youth; but be an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." (1 Timothy 4:12) Like David the shepherd-boy, you too will fight the wild bear and the roaring lion, and the Philistines who appear so powerful and important. You will not fight this battle using the untried and ill-fitting weapons of the world, but will use the word of God which you have tried, and studied, and read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested. You may be confident and know that you have the support of our love and prayers, and that, as the hymn-writer says:

And were this world all devils o'er,  
And watching to devour us,  
We lay it not to heart so sore;  
Not they can overpower us.  
And let the prince of ill  
Look grim as e'er he will,  
He harms us not a whit;  
For why? - his doom is writ;  
A word shall quickly slay him.

AMEN

The Rev'd D. A. Petley