

1994: ST. MICHAEL'S CONFERENCE SERMON

"They that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country."

We have gathered together once again for this week long Conference in which we have worshipped, studied, and enjoyed fellowship and friendship with one another. Some of you didn't really know what you were getting yourselves into. Some of you have been returning for years and knew what to expect. All this praying! All this study of the things of God! So much going to church! Why is it that young people like yourselves keep coming back to this Conference year after year?

St. Paul is writing about those who live by faith when he says: "They who do such things declare plainly that they seek a country". The "country" of which St. Paul writes is the Kingdom of Heaven. This is "a new and blessed Country, the home of God's elect", which enjoys as its capital the Heavenly City of Jerusalem, the City of God. St. Paul tells us that we are already citizens of this Heavenly Country if we belong to Christ and live by faith. We have dual citizenship. We live in this world and belong to the country whose name is featured on our passport. We also belong to a Heavenly Country. We owe ultimate allegiance to a Heavenly King, Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is enthroned at his Heavenly Father's right hand. We live in this world. It is our home. And yet, we live as those who belong elsewhere. We are, in a sense, "strangers and pilgrims" on this earth.

I'm reminded of the true story of a missionary who came from the United States and went to China. He was to be met by his guide at the train station in Beijing and he worried as he wondered how, with the thousands of people in the station, he was going to be able to find him. His fears were quickly dispelled as the tall American stepped off the train onto the platform and discovered that he was a foot taller and a different colour than all the people swirling around him. He didn't have to find anybody. They would easily find him. He'd stand out.

Those from another country often do stand out. We may not look differently than anyone else. However, our accents, our manners, our way of looking at things, clearly indicate that we belong elsewhere. We might even make the natives restless. They might look us over with a scrutinizing eye and say: "You're not from around here".

As Christians, we belong to a city and a country whose builder and maker is God. It is a city in which charity is all in all. Real love is the currency of this city whose ruler is the Lord of Love himself, who suffered and died for us and who commanded us to love one another with the very love he has for us. This love compels us to forgive all who have hurt us in any way. This love compels us to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile over and above what's expected of us in service, and to seek to be reconciled with those who have decided to make themselves our enemies. This love moves us to treat our enemies as if they were our dearest friends. We pray for those who use us badly and we strive to let go of every old grudge and vendetta. We forget every notion of getting even with those who have hurt us and we seek to love them more than they seem capable of loving themselves.

If we truly live this way, we'll stand out. People will look at us and shake their heads as if to say: "You're not from around here!" If we truly live this way, we'll declare by our actions and attitude that we seek a country. We desire a new and better country to which, by faith, we already belong. We are in this world but not of it; our citizenship is in Heaven.

One of the fun things we do at this conference is taking you all on the road trips which we make to the beach and to Charlottetown. I usually let you play your tapes in the car. Listening to the music you enjoy is a mixed blessing. A few days ago we were on route listening to a band called "Soul Asylum," a band name fitting for our St. Michael's Conference. I was struck by the lyrics to one song:

"I'm homesick, but it's not so bad,
I'm homesick for a home I've never had."

These lyrics could describe the soul's longing for its true rest, the real and eternal peace and joy of Heaven. If you have at this conference experienced any amount of peace, or joy. If you have found love and friendship and a sense of belonging, then please realize that this is but a brief glance, a small glimmer, a faint taste, of the full and abiding joy of our Heavenly home.

Realize this as well! This conference does not end today. For this conference to have been a success means that you carry on the prayer, the Bible reading, the study, which you have begun here. Also remember that you don't do any of this alone. If you get discouraged and distracted at home and with your friends at school, you must not forget that everyone sitting in this chapel today, Michaelite students and staff, are your brothers and sisters in Christ, and we love you and will pray for you. We travel together as we make our journey to our promised land.

From your courses I hope you'll remember that getting settled in their new country, their promised land, was for the people of Israel, a hard ordeal. They had to conquer those who were living in that land. Some of these people had great armies and strong, fortified cities like the City of Jericho. But God led them to victory. He appointed Joshua to lead the people to great and quite miraculous victories. The walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

If we are going to settle in our promised land, our better country, we must also ^ defeat our enemies. We must also be mighty in victory. However, the enemies we fight are not flesh and blood. The battlefield in which we wage war cannot be located on a map. Our enemies which must be conquered are spiritual enemies. They are our sins which wage war in our souls. The soul is our battlefield. It' s there we must win the victory.

Praise God, we have a Joshua who leads us to victory. Our Joshua is our Lord Jesus Christ. It is in Christ, and through Christ, that we may live the victorious life as God's children. St. Michael and all Angels point us to this very Christ. The angels are ministering spirits directing us to the Lord Jesus. The word 'angel' means the same thing as 'messenger'. Angels bring us the word. They point us to the Word of God incarnate, our Lord Jesus Christ. They surround us on the road to victory.

We may be victorious in the possession of the promised land if we remain faithful to the Word. This is St. Michael's great example. He was victorious over the devil because he used the sharp, two-edged sword of God's word. We must read and study the word so that we may be faithful to and grow up in the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. As we love Him more and know Him more we will live as citizens of the promised land as we see the Kingdom of God within us. If we do such things, we shall declare plainly that we:

.... Desire a better country, that is, a heavenly:
wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God,
for he has prepared for them a city. (Hebrews, 11:16)

The Rev'd D. A. Petley