

## 1996: ST. MICHAEL'S CONFERENCE SERMON

I'm sure that most of us have seen and admired lovely stained-glass windows. In older churches with older windows the craftsmanship often is outstanding. It is a splendid thing to observe the sun's light streaming through beautiful red, blue, green and yellow bits of glass which are illuminated with brilliant radiance. Most often the stained glass pictures some saint of the church in an appropriate setting: St. Paul being converted on the Damascus Road, St. Mary with the infant Jesus, St. Cecilia singing and making music, or St. Michael with great wings, banishing the evil serpent to the place of punishment.

I am reminded of the story of a little girl about Elizabeth Stockall's age who use to sit in church and pass the time looking up at the stained-glass windows in which the saints were shining brightly in the sun's morning light. One Sunday morning the priest invited the children to come to the front of the church for a talk. He asked if anyone could tell him who the saints are? The little girl raised her hand. "Do you know who the saints are?" asked the priest. The little girl nodded, and then, pointing to the windows, she said, "the saints are the ones the light shines through."

The little girl's answer was profound. The saints - those who are holy - are indeed those whose lives are illuminated by the light of Christ. We are called by God and told by Jesus to be the children of light. We are to light up this dark world with the radiance of God's Son.

If we are going to live as children of the light, we must receive that light. How is this done? Must we go off looking for it? Is it only to be found in some secret place, some long lost ritual, some deep and mysterious location?

The Gospel reading tells us that the angels "always behold the face" of the Heavenly-Father. The angels receive the light of God directly, face to face. However, we are not angels. We live here on Earth, in time. We must receive God's light in stages and in a variety of ways. It is as if too much light at once might blind us, or even kill us. We receive the light of Christ in Baptism when God's reconciling love is known by us in the same way that infants know that they are loved. We receive the light of Christ when we "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" his holy Word. This has, after all, been the abiding purpose of all the courses taught in this Conference. All of the courses taught here, whether the focus was upon Scripture, Theology, or Spirituality, were meant to teach us God's Word and shed the light of Christ. It is this very light which we receive in the Sacraments of the church, such as this Holy Communion which we celebrate today.

In each instance the light of Christ is received by us. It is received. We are not discovering it or even finding it. The light of Christ finds us, and we find ourselves within it. The fact that we have trouble receiving this light has nothing to do with the light being hidden, or unavailable, or dim. The trouble we have in receiving the light of Christ has to do with our own blindness. We are blinded by our own fears and ignorance. We are blinded by hardness of heart and contempt of God's Word. We are blinded by our unruly and confused will. Our eyes are weak and our vision obscured. We need to open our eyes. We must look with greater intensity and not turn away our faces. We must resolve to no longer linger in the shadows cast by ignorance and fear and to turn toward the brightness and clarity of God's Word.

Not only must we receive the light of Christ, we must also resolve to live in the "light. We must not receive Christ's light but prefer the darkness, "for if that light within you be darkness, how great is that darkness."

You must not go home from this Conference and return to the darkness. You must live in the light of what you have learned here. This means praying, attending church, reading-your Bible, studying the Christian faith, and living a charitable and holy life. This is how we live in the light. We pray that this Conference helped to enable you to live in the light.

It is never enough simply to know the truth. We must also love and live in truth. It is never enough simply to receive the light of Christ. We must also love and live in the light. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us, we need to repent:

...not only of the words and acts of the children of darkness, but also for the fears and apathy of the children of light.

In the great vision of St. John's Revelation, St. Michael fought as one who is governed by the light of Christ. He overcame the serpent. Truth defeated falsehood, knowledge overcame ignorance, love overcame fear, light shined in darkness, the Word of God conquered and reigned, and St. Michael, as ambassador and emissary of that Word, was mighty and unbeatable in battle.

The battle between light and darkness takes place in this world. It happens all around us, here at home, and in our homes. This very battle rages also within each one of us. We seek the light, but fear, ignorance, hardness of heart, pride, lust, greed, hurt feelings, self-pity, and any number of dark thoughts wage war against the light of God's love. We must repent and put away these sins so that the light of Christ may brightly shine through us. We are like those stained-glass windows. Each of us is unique. You are the only you that God has made, and he made you you because he loves you. In each of us the pattern varies. The colours differ. Each of us has our own gifts as well as our own crosses to bear. And yet, the light of Christ shines through us from within us and allows our true colours to show forth to his glory. We have gathered together this week in order to receive the light of Christ, and to find ourselves in that light so that we may know ourselves as the precious children whom God loves. You are precious to God and you are loved by God. You are God's child in whom his love abides. We love you as well, and will pray for you. Please pray for us and for one another. Encourage one another throughout the year to pray and live the Christian life in its fullness. Write each other and stay in touch with each other until we see each other next year at St. Michael's.

Most important of all; do not forget God's love for you. The world may deny God's love, some might fear it, and the devil might hate it, but all to no avail. God loves you. Do not forget that by his Spirit, the Lord Jesus Christ is within you. The Father and the Son have made their home with you and love you with an everlasting love. Grow within that love. Shine brightly in that light. Shine as sparks among stubble. Light up the dark night with brightness as stars. Be as St. Michael and All Angels and seek the face of your heavenly Father and grow in his grace for ever and ever. AMEN.

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