

2001: ST. MICHAEL'S YOUTH CONFERENCE SERMON

I have called you friends. +

I suspect that Jesus telling us to become as little children is as popular with a teenage congregation as a pat on the top of the head or a good pinch of the cheek. While all your efforts, supported by the greedy and cruel best of our popular culture, are geared towards looking and acting older, Jesus tells us to act younger. You may feel conflicted here. I hear Fr. Stockall saying, "Grow up, get over it" and I hear Jesus saying, "Become as little children". So who is right? Jesus does not tell us to imitate every aspect of childhood. In our text he is quite specific. Our becoming as little children is part of our Christian conversion, without which, without that radical change even rebirth, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. It is the humility of little children that we are called to take up. It is the humility which can accept the kingdom of heaven as a gift. For if there is one thing children are good at, it is receiving gifts. Greatness in the kingdom of heaven is all God's grace and it belongs to those who are humble enough to receive and trust that grace not their own abilities and accomplishments. Just think of how little children brag ... little children brag not about themselves but about their Father, his strength and glory. May it be so with us!

We must receive humbly, as little children, but Fr. Stockall has a point too. As we mature, we are called to decide. We heard Elijah speak words which must be addressed to fence sitters like us, people who have not given themselves wholly to the one true God, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him". "Choose this day whom you will serve", Joshua said, "but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord". But our choosing is only a participation in the Lord's choice, as our knowing is in his knowing and our loving in his loving. If we know him, it is because he first knew us. If we love him, it is because he first loved us. If we choose to serve him, it is because he first chose us. It is a joy for us, as staff, to see God at work in your lives and we believe that your being here is part of his plan to draw you to himself in and through Jesus Christ.

What makes this week so enjoyable and sweet for all of us is friendship and the friendships continued, begun and fed here are a gift of God. As fellow Michaelites, despite our reluctant parent-like harassment and even my occasional authoritarian outbursts, we meet as friends. At its best this week is a celebration of Christian friendship. And for you, at this particular stage of your life, friendships are so important. The growing importance of friendships to you is no doubt the cause of tension at home but it is a necessary part of growing up. I am more and more convinced that friendship is the highest category of human relationship. We are husbands and wives, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, staff and students but the highest category is friends.

"Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you".

No greater love than the love of friendship - no greater friendship than that of him who lays down his life for us, Jesus Christ. This Conference is about the friendship of Jesus Christ who chose us as his friends and we grow together in that friendship by learning, by growing in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and by obedience to him.

In him we have a sure friend, the one our hearts long for and in him we are freed to accept and offer friendship though we hurt and disappoint each other. The friendship of Jesus Christ extends to all places and situations and our friendship in Christ extends beyond all boundaries of male and female, of age, of musical taste, of clothing style, even of death. We have friends on earth and friends above.

The test of this Conference is the fruit it bears in your life the rest of the year. The test of our friendship is our obedience to Jesus Christ. The test will come back at school with the bombardment of dangerous

temptations to steal, to fornicate, to drink, to do drugs, to swear, to betray friends, to be mean and cruel, to lie and to cheat, that faces you all. There is a battle and parts of that battle are no more fierce than in your teens when the devil can get the better of you early on. If he can get you to destroy yourself, he saves himself a lot of work. In that battle, in the moral and intellectual struggles you face, in the struggle to believe, God would equip you and strengthen you so that you might overcome. First, by the blood of the lamb, that you may be secure, safe and saved in every way in the death of Jesus your friend. Second, by the word of their testimony, by the word of God in your ear, in your mind and heart and on your lips, you are equipped for the battle against hatred, lies and despair. Finally, God sends his holy angels to fight with you and for you and your angel guards you.

Here in this sacrament we have the feast of our friendship. We remember and enter into the love of him who laid down his life for us. Here we taste and see his gracious love. Here we find the friendship with God and man for which we were created, all in Jesus Christ. Here we taste and receive and claim and share in his promise, "I assign you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom".

"That you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom".

And we shall. And we do. Amen.

The Rev'd Michael Hawkins