

## 2003: ST MICHAEL'S YOUTH CONFERENCE SERMON

*"And they overcame him by the Blood of the Lamb,  
and by the word of their testimony; and they loved  
not their lives unto the death" (Revelation 12:11)*

**In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN**

When Father Stockall asked me, a few days before St Michael's began, if I would preach the sermon at this morning's Eucharist, I said yes, but then immediately began to panic. I remembered that these sermons are usually sent out to you in a mailing with the Conference photo etc. My problem is that I hardly ever write out my sermons. In addition to wrestling with what to say all week -- that especial torture that I'm sure our Director enjoys inflicting on the conference preachers each year -- I had to agonize over whether or not I should try to write it out, or not. At 2 a.m. this morning I succumbed to good sense, went to bed and had the decision made for me (by default) to just preach as I usually do in my own parish.

All of this conference each year is about preparing for the spiritual combat we all face in our daily life as Christians in this fallen world full of evil and darkness. It is a kind of spiritual 'boot camp' or basic training. We have now among us, thanks to my course, ("the most important one you'll ever do at St Mike's", according to the course description!) two 'graduate classes' of specialists in the arts of spiritual warfare! In that class we learned that one of the most persistent and effective weapons of our enemy is distraction. Noise, busy-ness, a frantic rushing about, so characteristic of our time in history. He wants to keep us 'busy' and distracted to keep us from thinking, from really feeling anything deeply, from reflecting on what our life is all about. He wants us to live life at the level of passing feelings, superficiality, and shallowness. He wants to keep us from appreciating the meaning and beauty of life and from discovering that there truly is a purpose in our existence. We often lose sight of this in the hustle and bustle of daily life. We are like the young man serving the Prophet Elisha in that wonderful lesson from Second Kings at Morning Prayer. We need to have our eyes opened to see what is really going on around us; to remember that God's holy ones, his saints and angels, are fighting for us and with us. That, "they that are with us are greater than they that are with them!" Then our eyes are opened and the curtain to the invisible spiritual realm is pulled back so we, too, can see those horses and chariots of fire.

If you were in charge of drawing up battle plans for the devil in his fight against the human race, do you think you could come up with any better plan for a society more to his liking than the one we have built in the last hundred or two years, or so? Could you design a culture that is more distracted, can't find its way that lacks direction, focus and purpose? [In a recent discussion on the significance of the 20th Century just passed, participants were asked if they could describe the last century of the second millennium in a word. One young woman said, "Yeah, a four-letter word!" Waiting breathlessly for her to fill in the blank, all had to marvel at her insight as she uttered the word -- busy.] We have become what C.S. Lewis called, "men without chests"-- a world of shallow, superficial, people, without hearts, without souls. All with no idea of what we're up against. Like the young man with Elisha, we need to be reminded that the devil is out-numbered, that he is not able to win the battle, in fact that he is already defeated. A flag is planted on the site of his defeat, "that blood-red flag, lifted high above, that bears His Name alone", there -- in Christ's Cross on Calvary.

Our life is full of all kinds of things. We share a small slice of it together here at St Michael's each year. We give thanks for and offer up that shared life together here today at the Altar of our God. Even here we have hustle and bustle in the frantic rounds of meals, chapel, classes, clean-up, challenges, road trips -- and the occasional outbreak of a Holy Water War! This week together, as we return year after year, is the model for what all of our life is to be like. Unhappily, we are not able to be with all these wonderful people each and every day, so you can't always have the high intellectual caliber of discussion that you get in your cabins at night! Yet, we all can seek out ways to find those that will engage us in that kind of deeper, thoughtful talk we enjoy here. At the very least we can exercise our own minds and hearts in reading and reflecting on life's meaning and purpose.

The devil knows that he has already lost the war, yet he still rages on in battle. He can no longer harm Jesus as he tried to do all through his earthly ministry. He thought he'd won for all time at Calvary, only to discover that his 'greatest victory' on Good Friday was actually his ultimate defeat. That in his death upon the Cross, Christ defeated evil and death itself, "swallowing up death in death." Christ is risen victorious from the grave, "trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life!" Since he can no longer touch Jesus, the devil's strategy is to attack us. The Bible in the Acts of the Apostles tells us that, when Christ appeared in vision and spoke to St Paul he said, "Saul, why are you persecuting ME?", when Paul was persecuting Christians. To attack us, is to attack Jesus -- in his Church, his Mystical Body. That is why the old dragon, Satan, rages so. As Revelation 12:12 tells us, he is cast out of heaven onto the earth, and he knows his time's short. So the devil 'gets busy'. He's busy keeping us busy! "There's no time", he tries to tell us. No time to think, meditate, pray, reflect. No time just to take a deep breath and notice what life's all about.

We have strong defences against that infernal noise and busy-ness he tries to drown us in. We have experienced and practiced them here all week in teaching, discussion, Scripture, prayer and worship, in just spending time together and enjoying good company. As [Peter Kreeft's fictional tempter] 'Snakebite' said, our front-line of defence is found in "The Three S's" so rarely practiced today: Silence, Solitude, Simplicity. We find them here in our training camp -- St Mike's -- we need to seek them out every day. The devil our adversary wants to make everything all noise and distraction to put us 'off our game'. He hates both silence -- which allows us to seriously examine our lives and seek God -- and music -- which leads us to appreciate God's truth and beauty, to worship and adore him.

We've all taken time this week just to be quiet -- well some of us, anyway! We all need to 'quiet our souls' in God's presence each and every day. We need to be quiet, to take time to listen -- to a friend, to God, to his Word. Even just to take a minute to rejoice in the beauty of his Creation and to give thanks in our hearts. As we have learned here, we need to make time daily to retreat from the hectic pace of life's battle. It is in those times that we will see, like Elisha's young friend, the curtain pulled back to reveal the battle as seen in its true dimensions -- the real picture.

We are given many opportunities in life to look deeper into the reality of things, to see the big picture. We do that primarily through prayer and Scripture. Prayer: talking with God. Scripture: listening to God. As we read and meditate upon Scripture we even learn better how and what to pray for, we hear God's voice teaching us. We are given the opportunity here at St Michael's to form deep friendships. Believe me when I say that I know personally that there are strong friendships made here that are life-long and solid. True friends that will be with you through times of trial and difficulty, and even greatest sorrow and tragedy in your life. The friendships made in the Body of Christ carry you through this life. You will be strengthened and sustained by many present and past 'grad students' of spiritual battle.

Fr Pearce all this week has been talking to us about the story of Jacob. At one point in life he has that wonderful vision in a dream at Bethel, that dream of "Jacob's Ladder". He sees that ladder or stairway to heaven, linking heaven and earth, and the angels of God going up and down on it. That same image is re-called for us by Jesus, when he calls St Bartholomew, or Nathaniel, to be an Apostle. First Nathaniel is very skeptical. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?", he asks mockingly. Jesus calls out to him, "Behold a true Israelite, there's no deceit in him!" Nathaniel is quite pleased with this compliment and asks, "How do you know me?" Jesus tells him that before Phillip called him he saw him sitting under a fig tree, to which Nathaniel replies, "Teacher, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus asks if he believes just because he saw him under the fig tree and proclaims, "You will see greater things than these! You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man!" Jesus is the ladder that joins heaven and earth, God and Man.

Many of you will remember Fr Taylor's course last year on Icons. You learned that they are 'windows into heaven'. We can catch a little glimpse, a little 'preview' of heaven through them. We can see deeply into the truth of reality, with the eyes of faith. Not only in icons and other Christian art can we get this glimpse. We have many 'icons' of Christ, many 'windows into heaven'. We have them in those precious times with family and friends that feel like we're already in heaven. When we look into the eyes of a young child.

When we just take a deep breath and are quiet and appreciate being still in God's presence. When we enjoy the staggering beauty of his Creation. Take the opportunity to open the window. Take time to peer into it.

Christ is the true icon, the very express image of the Father. The Son of God has come down from heaven, joined our human nature with his divine nature, taken it into himself, in order to raise it up into the very throne of heaven. He has taken our glorified human nature to "sit at the right hand of the Father."

Finally we have another window, here -- at the Altar. This is our Bethel, the House of God, the gate of heaven. The place on Earth where we experience most deeply the joining of heaven and earth. Here Jesus comes down to us, to take our life into his, to join us to him, to raise us up, so that we can go forth from here, with his life living in us. As we offer him thanks and praise, we offer him ourselves, and he takes our lives, heals and forgives us, transforms, consecrates our lives and fills us with his life. We offer him our life, unworthy as we are, as a "living sacrifice", made holy, consecrated by his life, offered for us. We offer him this whole week that we have shared so richly together. Our pondering of the great mysteries of life and faith. Our 'holy water wars'. Our 'grossing out' our table mates with strange concoctions made from left-overs. Even our fun we offer up to him. Our laughter, that great weapon in our spiritual arsenal against our enemy, we offer up to him. We were reminded by a contestant on Quiz Night -- in a 'bonus' answer -- that laughter is a sound the devil hates. Our good-hearted fun together here is something that he can't stand, because he wants us to be miserable. God wants us to enjoy each other, and all the goodness of life, to the fullest.

Look around you here. This is your true Family -- here is the Communion of Saints. Here with us are the saints of God down through the centuries Here with us are the many being persecuted right now around the world for their bearing testimony to Christ. People that are here with us this morning and people you will never meet in this life are your real, lasting family.

We have a foretaste of what ultimate reality is all about, our fullness of life in the Kingdom, here in the Holy Eucharist. Here Jesus -- the fulfilment of Jacob's vision of the Ladder to Heaven -- comes to us and gives us the very strength of His own Life, takes our life into his and offers it up to the Father, a living sacrifice. We "lift up our hearts" to God in and through Christ, we offer our lives up to Him -- and through him We remember those not with us today: parted from us by their work in other parts of God's Kingdom, by illness or other circumstances, or by death. They too, in spirit and through prayer, join with us here at the 'gate of heaven' in Christ.

We have a special privilege here at St Mike's to 'retreat' together as God's family, for a time of refreshment of body and soul; to reflect, to allow the curtain to be pulled back a little, to see what is really real, to peer deeply into the beauty and the gift and the mystery of life. We also have time to look honestly into the mirror, to look deep into our hearts and see our faults, our failures in walking the Way of the Cross, and the awesome power of that Cross to forgive and save us. We can see the all-powerful armament God alone can give us: Scripture -- and prayer informed by the truth of Scripture . We learn proficiency in the use of those spiritual weapons here in our 'basic training'.

To close let me leave you with an illustration, a little 'window into heaven' that I think sums up nicely all I've been trying to say this morning. It is a picture in an old book on my shelf at home. The front and back inside covers have a picture of the same thing -- seen from two different points of view. It is a book mark with some stitch-work on it that belonged to the author's mother. On the inside front cover it seems just a meaningless pattern, a confused tangle of threads with no meaning or purpose. That is a visual parable for the kind of life the Devil wants us to live: an unexamined life, hollow, superficial, always consumed with 'busy- ness' and no time to reflect on the meaning and purpose of it all. Tragically, so much of the world today lives just that sort of life, rushing around in a meaningless frenzy of shallow activity until we die.

On the back cover of the book is the 'flip-side' of the book mark. In the stitching seen from its 'right side', the real picture emerges, and we see those three powerful words from the Bible: "God is Love".

The analogy to our spiritual lives is clear. We are all like that young servant of Elsiha. We like him, look around at the world with the eyes of flesh, and see the forces arrayed against us, and we start to think that it's all hopeless -- we're doomed! We all need, like him, to 'have our eyes opened' -- the eyes of faith. When his eyes were opened he saw that heavenly army, greater than any army that could ever be mustered here on earth . That army whose Captain is Blessed Michael the Archangel. That army whose Head is the Risen Lord Jesus, the Son of the Living God. That army that has already conquered in and through Him -- under the banner of His Cross, that emblem of that unconquerable Love which made the universe, and redeems it by His Precious Blood. An occupying earthly army 'wins' by defeating and crushing its opponents, subjecting them to its will. But, as the old hymn says:

Conquering kings their titles take, from the foes they captive make;  
Jesus, by a nobler deed, from the thousands he hath freed!

Jesus, through his Cross and by his Blood, sets us free, truly and fully liberates us, to live the only life that can bring us true happiness, not just now, but forever! When we are tempted to base our life on the 'National Anthem of Hell -- "I did it MY Way!" -- we find only bondage and corruption. But when we surrender to him, we find joy in serving him, "whose service is perfect freedom"!

In other words, the 'right-side' view of the bookmark is the one we constantly need to re-focus our eyes upon. The mysteries of evil, sin and suffering in our world, and in our own lives, will only make sense when we embrace the perspective of eternity. From that eternal perspective the words, "God is Love" shout out at us -- from the Cross of Jesus. That is the answer of the Love of God to evil and suffering. He goes to the Cross for us to take it all into himself. He takes onto himself the cause of it all -- our sins.

We are given these rich opportunities every day to peer into the 'windows of heaven'; to catch glimpses of the eternal glory awaiting us. There are so many 'windows'. The daily opportunities to read Scripture and pray, to soak ourselves in the very Word of God. We can come into his Presence -- or really, just recall to mind, that we are already always walking in his Presence -- and be strengthened for the struggles in that daily walk with Jesus. We see his Presence in so many earthly 'windows'. In the eyes of a young child, full of wonder. In the breath-taking beauty of sunrise or sunset. By looking into the eyes of those we know who grieve deeply, or are going through great difficulties, and just being there for them, embracing them, sharing their tears. In the lives of brothers and sisters in the Family of God, many of whom we may never meet in this life, so many of whom are at this very hour being jailed, abused, tortured or even killed for their faith in Christ -- their testimony to the Lamb. Above us all they know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they have ultimately 'overcome the world' in Jesus. Jesus doesn't promise it'll all be easy following him, just the opposite. He says, "in the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world!" They, most of all of us, have discovered the truth of what Jesus also said on that same occasion, at the Last Supper: "You shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice; and you shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy!" Not that there will be no sorrow and suffering or that it isn't deeply real, or that it doesn't matter. It matters so much to our Heavenly Father that he gives his Son to die for us!

But this is the amazing mystery of our faith. The very things of our sorrow and pain, are transformed, turned into the cause of our joy. As disciples we see this in the Cross: "See from his head, his hands his feet; sorrow and love flow mingled down". In the devil's kingdom of busy-ness, of noise and confusion, we find no meaning, no purpose, we are literally lost. We wander haplessly around the battle field that is the earth -- mistaking it for a comfortable bathtub - stepping on spiritual land mines all over the place. As long as we only see it the way of the world, the flesh and the devil, we will try to find fulfillment by putting self first. What we will find then is only a hollow emptiness -- devoid of any meaning and purpose. So much of our world is tragically lost in that kind of a lifeless life. But, when we embrace the Cross, when we take it up so that we can die to self, then, mysteriously, we find real life. We find our true purpose only in Christ. When we give our lives to him -- as he has given his life for us -- we find our true lives in Him. As St Paul

says, it is no longer we who live, but Christ living in us. When we give Him our lives, they find meaning, purpose, and happiness. A joy that the world cannot take from us. In and through his offering of himself, made available to us here at his Altar, our life is taken into his. He has taken our human nature into himself, transforming it and filling it with his living Presence, so that we can now live for him: "that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us." This is how the perspective of eternity is revealed to us, through the Passion of Christ. In this real perspective, we can here join our praises, "with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven," for we worship the same Lamb of God. We can know the overpowering peace and joy which Christ's Presence alone gives. We here, today, can know -- 'in our bones'-- down to the very core of our being, this same glorious truth which the holy martyrs of ages past -- and of this very day -- know and rejoice in:

"And they overcame him by the Blood of the Lamb,  
and by the word of their testimony;  
and they loved not their lives unto the death"

And now unto God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost, be all honour, majesty, dominion and splendour, henceforth and for evermore. AMEN!

Gerald Laskey+ August 2003