

2004: ST MICHAEL'S YOUTH CONFERENCE SERMON

From the Book of the Revelation to St John, 'There was war in heaven...'

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

'War in heaven.' Very strange. And then all this about dragons and such. It sounds like science fiction. What can it all mean?

God often has to talk to us about things we cannot see or imagine. In order to do that, he has to use ideas, pictures or images of things that are familiar to us. Sometimes they have to be stretched quite a lot to say what needs to be said. The Book of Revelation has many important things to say. In order to say them, it often stretches ideas and images a long way.

In the lesson we heard moments ago, God uses familiar images of warfare to tell us of a hidden, spiritual warfare. This is the war against the forces that stand between us and joy. What kind of a war is it? A spiritual one, no doubt. But what does that mean? The Russians have a wonderful folk tale that makes this very clear.

[I have borrowed this story from Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, one of my favourite writers on prayer and life in Christ.]

There was an old woman in a great city - poor, bitter and angry. She sold turnips for a living. Each morning she would go to the farmer and fill her wheelbarrow. Each day she would walk the streets hour after hour, selling turnips for a few cents apiece, barely making enough to stay alive. And day by day she grew harder - more bitter, more angry, more turned in on herself. Only once in her long life did she do something freely and willingly for someone else. A beggar asked for a turnip, and this once she gave him one, and did not ask for any money. Only once.

The old woman died and went to hell.

Remember - this is a story! It is a story that tells a great truth, but the point is not really about what happens to us when we die. The point is about what begins to happen to us already in this life when we lose these spiritual battles.

The old woman died and went to hell, then. In agony she looked up one day and saw an angel coming down to her. As he drew closer she could see that the angel had something in his hand, and that he was holding it out to her. What was it? He drew closer. A turnip! With the green top in his hand he held it out to her and said, 'Hold on to this, and I will pull you out.' She clutched at the top, pulled it toward her, and caught a firm hold. The angel began to go up.

Everything was going well. Then things took a bad turn. All around the woman were people who were just as anxious to escape as she was. As she began to rise above them, they grabbed at her, holding on to her clothes, her feet, her legs - anything they could reach. In a moment, all the bitterness and anger of a lifetime came back to her. She began to kick and twist, trying to get rid of them all. The turnip began to sway, and the top began to break under the pressure. Desperately she lashed out with all her strength to free herself from the people she believed were dragging her down. As she did, the top snapped and she fell back down among them.

The angel called to her sadly. 'Once,' he said, 'you gave a turnip to a poor man. If you had been willing, I would have emptied all hell on the strength of this good thing that God did in you. But because you would not have others come with you, the turnip has broken, and I have no way to lift you out.'

What stood between this woman and joy? Not God. Not other people. The way was open. What stood in the way was her own will - her own love - her own heart and mind. She could not receive mercy and life from God so long as she was not ready to see God give mercy and life to others. She thought that what stood between her and happiness was other people - and perhaps God. But she was wrong. God willed only good for her. The problem was with her. She had made herself unable to receive joy. She did not wish to have a share in the mind and heart of God - the life of God, which is true and lasting joy.

What stands between us and joy? What stands between us and the fulfilment of the deepest and best desires of our hearts not only to be loved but to be lovable - worthwhile, important? Not other people. If the first thing that we learn from today's lesson from the Book of Revelation is that we are involved in a great spiritual battle, the next thing we learn is that our enemies are not other people. St Paul says, 'We wrestle not against flesh and blood' - not against other people - 'but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places' [Ephesians 6:12]. What stands between us and joy is hidden within *us*.

The lesson talks about the Dragon, 'that old serpent', the Devil, and his angels. These are our spiritual enemies. However, we miss the point entirely if we spend our time thinking about them, worried about them, afraid of them. They are not God. They have only the power that God allows them. God gives them freedom, just as he has given us freedom. However, just as God puts limits on our power to ruin ourselves and others, he puts limits on them, too. They are not God. They do not have power over our life and our destiny, unless we give it to them.

How do we give our spiritual enemies power over us to ruin us? Well, the Dragon's most powerful weapons against us are lies about God, and the truth about ourselves. Remember the serpent in the garden. How does he get through to Eve? Not by telling her, 'Go out and murder, pillage and destroy.' No. And he seldom comes to us that way, either. If he did, we would recognize him and reject him. The serpent gets through to Eve by destroying her confidence in God. 'See the fruit of this tree!', he says in effect. 'Why would God keep it from you? If he loved you, wouldn't he want every good thing for you?' Once Eve is not sure of God's love, she is ready to be persuaded to disobey him. The serpent is able to persuade her, 'This is your chance! You cannot wait for God. If you want it, you must take it now!' And so she disobeys God, and brings ruin upon first herself, and then her husband. Shame comes between them, so that they hide from one another. And when God comes to speak with them, they hide from God, and blame one another for what they have done. It is a miserable scene. And it all began because Eve was persuaded to doubt God's care for her.

You see, our spiritual enemies have two great weapons: lies about God, and the truth about ourselves. Because we believe the lie that God does not care for us, that he does not know us by name, we are very weak. And once we have done things that we are ashamed of and don't want to face, the demons are ready to throw these things in our face and urge us to hide from God and from one another. They use the truth about us as a weapon against us. They also use lies about God: his mercy is not deep enough to reach to us, his power is not great enough to make us free and glorious creatures.

We are fighting in a spiritual war, and our enemies have a clear war aim: they want us to give up. They want us to despair of God's power and goodness. They want us to think that we have gone too far, that there is no hope for us. They want us to despair of becoming the glorious, free, courageous, hopeful and holy children of God. They want us to settle for something less, and grab it for ourselves, without relying on God's goodness.

God knows the things we are ashamed of. He knows the things that make us hide from him and from one another. But he is not like the devils. He is not waiting to throw these things in our faces. He wants us to be so confident of his goodness and his love for us that we are ready to show him the diseases of our minds and hearts, and call them by their right names: 'This, Lord, that I have done, is cowardice. This is betrayal. I have let down my friends - people who trusted me, who relied on me.' And so on. If we have this confidence in God, we are ready to face the truth about ourselves, and ready to let God make us his

true children. The truth about ourselves looks entirely different when it is seen in the light of the truth about God - who He is and how much He loves us.

We are not strong enough for this battle. In the Bible, when St Michael the Archangel, the prince of the spiritual armies of heaven, meets Satan, he says 'May God rebuke you [St Jude 9].' Michael's name means, 'Who is like unto God?' This is his strength in the face of the enemy. He points to God. If Michael is not strong enough for this battle against cowardice and despair, we are not strong enough either.

We are not strong enough for this battle. We cannot win by trying to be good. Its too late for that. We have already ruined ourselves and turned from God. Like St Michael, we must find our strength outside ourselves, in Jesus Christ, who has conquered all the forces that are lined up against us: fear, shame, sin and death itself.

We are not strong enough, but God is. God Himself is on our side: the Maker of all things, the Giver of all good gifts, the Author of life. All things serve him either willingly or against their will. He is good, and all that he makes is good. Nothing falls outside his knowledge or his love - not the farthest galaxy, not the smallest sub-atomic particle. Christ, the Son of God, is on our side: He who has suffered all things for us. Are we lonely? He was lonely, too. Are we rejected? He was rejected, too. Are we afraid? He was murdered. But no power in heaven or on earth shakes his love for us. He prays for the soldiers who nailed Him to the cross and for us, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. He arises from death that first Easter morning, and his first words to the followers who ran away and abandoned Him is 'Peace!' We are not strong enough! But God is. 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' (Romans 8:31)

Remember Elisha's servant in the great story we heard at Morning Prayer this morning. The King of Syria is determined to kill Elisha, you remember, because he tells the King of Israel his plans for war before his soldiers get there. One morning Elisha's servant goes outside to see the armies of Syria all around the town where they are staying, and he is terrified. Elisha prays that his servant may see what God has shown him. When he looks up, he sees behind the Syrian armies the armies of God: the holy angels. We are not alone. And remember what St Paul tells us. 'Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about [surrounded] with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith.' In other words, we are like competitors in an Olympic race, surrounded by tens of thousands who look on and cheer. We are surrounded on every side not only by the angels, but by the saints who have gone before us, whose constant prayer to God is that we may conquer despair and every evil. We are not alone.

What is our part then? Well, please don't leave St Michael's thinking that what your teachers and counsellors want is for you to go home and try to be good. That is guaranteed to fail. None of us are strong enough to hold on to God by our will. We must rely instead on his power to hold on to us. How do we learn to do that? But remembering the goodness of God. That's what Church is about. That's what prayer is about. That's what reading the Bible is all about. That's what Morning and Evening Prayer are about. Not endless rules and regulations, but the continual renewal of our hearts and minds in the knowledge of God's power, love and wisdom.

It will not do, however, just to read the words and go through the motions. One of the most important things your teachers and counsellors hope you take away from St Michael's is the understanding that Christian faith is something to think about. We cannot love what we do not know. If we are really to get into the habit of lifting up our minds and hearts to the goodness of God made known to us in Jesus, we must wrestle to understand what God has shown us. What is needed is not blind faith, but faith that sees - faith that has eyes wide open, a mind ready to think, a heart ready to see what is really good and worthwhile and choose it.

We do not lose faith because we think too much. We lose our faith for a number of reasons, but never because we have thought too much. Sometimes we are simply overcome with pain or anguish: someone

has died, some terrible thing has happened. In times like those we often find ourselves unable to think, too weak to look past the way things appear to the way things are - too weak to look past our tortured feelings and emotions. But these times do not last forever. The time comes when we can think again. We do not lose faith because we think too much. Often we lose it because we have thought too little, or because we have thought by ourselves - as if we were the first person to ask these questions - without help. We lose faith because we lose sight of the power, wisdom and love of the good God in the face of Jesus Christ. We lose sight because we do not look, or we close our eyes.

The Christian life is a war. But it is a spiritual war - a war with a difference. Our enemies do not need to use things outside us to make us give up. They can use our own minds and hearts against us - our own desires, our own love. And there is a lot at stake. The woman in the story did not simply lose her life. She had already lost that. She lost her humanity. She lost the chance to become human. Remember: when we lose these spiritual battles, we lose the things that make us truly human - truly alive.

God has given you weapons with which to fight back. Your teachers and counsellors hope that this Conference has been a kind of boot camp, at which you have learned something about these weapons and how to use them. Every one of these weapons does its job by renewing our memory of the power, wisdom and love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the face of Jesus. The Bible, the Holy Communion, the Church, our prayers, our Christian friends - all these recall us to the fact that the Maker and Ruler of all things is Love. Remember that you cannot run far enough away from God that He won't go all the way to find you. Remember that you are not alone. Remember that you are surrounded by the angels and the saints. You have a Christian family in your Parish back home. You have friends here at St Michael's. Everywhere, always, in all things, but especially here at His Altar in the great Sacrament of His Body and Blood, you have Christ Himself.

There was war in Heaven. Yes. There was and is war. But 'if Christ be for us, who can be against us?'

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Ranall Ingalls+ August 2004