

2005: ST. MICHAEL'S CONFERENCE SERMON

2 Kings 6:8-17 / Acts 12:1-11 / Revelation 12:7-11 / St. Matthew 18:1-10

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.(Romans 12:2)

It may seem difficult for you to believe this so early on a cold Saturday morning, when you might much rather be back in your cabin curled up in your sleeping bag keeping warm, but this week's Conference has been based on the very firmly held conviction that God dearly loves you; each one of you; that no matter what you may have ever done; no matter what anyone may have ever said about you; no matter what lies in your past, you are dearly loved by God. And, in a way, just about everything that we've done over the past five days, whether in class or in the pool or playing basketball or volleyball, even allowing Fr. Laskey to play pool basketball, just about everything that we've done this week, including gathering here in this place early each morning for prayer and worship and sacrament, in spite of our tiredness, has been, in some way or another, an attempt to express and to share that love.

Those of you who took Fr. Harris' course on the Creed may recall that one of the very first things that we profess about this great loving God is that He is the "Maker of heaven and earth . . . of all things visible and invisible". And, of course, this Conference confidently celebrates one part of that invisible creation: the work and ministry, the life and witness of God's angels.

Now, for some, the idea of angels or spiritual powers is profoundly embarrassing. For some, it sounds all too much like childhood stories and tacky valentine cards. And, were angels to be nothing other than what we see on those cards, with their images of chubby little baby boys in diapers aiming their bow and arrows, then angels should be an embarrassment to all of us.

But angels are far more than that; and they have much more important things to be doing.

This Conference is privileged to live and work under the patronage of St. Michael; and those of us who have spent this wonderfully exhausting week together have hopefully been reminded of at least three things that the angels point us to.

First, the angels show us where our true happiness, where our true joy, is to be found: as we heard in this morning's Gospel, in heaven they always behold the face of God the Father. In other words, they point us to heaven and to our life in and with God. In a world where people will tell you that your happiness will be found in other ways, in other places; in a very challenging time where some will invite you to share lesser, short term happiness, the angels remind us never to sell ourselves, and never to sell our future, so cheaply or so casually.

But the angels also call us to share in and to imitate their ministry. In this morning's Gospel reading we are promised that the angels have guardianship over all those who believe, and in particular, over little children; that we are protected by their presence and by their ministry. And we could do nothing better than to be called by them into the battle of protecting the young and the young at heart; to reach out to shelter those who are marginalised, rejected, forgotten, abused. I think we all know them. They live in our communities. They go to our schools. They are the victims of taunting and insult. And they need our help.

But thirdly, the angels, and St. Michael most of all, call us to share in the battle and the victory of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ: that great battle that we saw so vividly in last night's Pageant. It's a battle that's been won once and for all but it's not yet over. In a way, we've been like players who've been sitting on the bench while someone else has won an amazing victory for us. Our hope, though, is to share by membership in the glory of that victory; and even though we were not able to score the winning goal, we just might be able to add to the size and wonder of the victory.

There was war in heaven; and that cosmic spiritual battle is played out right now here on earth. And we've learnt this past week the way of victory in that struggle against the world, the flesh and the devil:

"They overcame him by the blood of the lamb; and by the word of their testimony."

And that, of course, is the other thing we've been trying to do this week. By thinking seriously about very serious things; by hearing and reading God's Word, and by being challenged to understand it, we are taking up our role in this great cosmic battle. The Epistle of Jude tells us of the very best way to wage this war, (Jude 9: "the Lord rebuke thee.") just as Michael waged that same battle against Satan; just as Christ waged that same battle: with a word; with God's Word.

The greatest weapon that Satan will ever try to use against any of us is just a lie: the lie that we need not try; the lie that God neither knows us or cares about us; the lie that there is no hope; that we might just as well do and say what everyone else is doing and saying, because there's no point in trying to do anything better; the lie that would convince us that despair is the only answer.

But it is, of course, just a lie; and one of the great things about angels when they show up in the Biblical story is that they almost always say the same thing: "Fear not!"

Fear not this great deceiver, for Christ has already won the day!

That victory over sin and death, that victory over hopelessness and despair, is God's free gift through our Lord Jesus Christ. We too can overcome by the blood of the Lamb.

In the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for me, and in the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for me, I know by faith a victory over all my enemies: over despair, over discouragement, over self-loathing, self-destructiveness, hatred, lies, ignorance and even death.

And that victory is offered to us this morning in this holy sacrament; that we might go forth from this Conference into the world; back to our homes, back to our families, back to our schools and our communities. This Conference ends this morning, and for many of us, including me, that will be a sad moment; but while this conference will soon be over, our work has just begun.

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