

2006: ST. MICHAEL'S CONFERENCE SERMON

Revelation 12:7-11 Matthew 18:1-10

*"They overcame [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony;
and they loved not their lives unto the death."*

We have come once again to the end of another St. Michael's Conference. We have learned here a little more about God, a little more about our own souls, and, I hope, a little more about love. We know something very special here - a fellowship of Christian love - not something to be taken for granted.

Our time together has been surrounded by prayer. And we have been engaging in the difficult task of lifting our hearts and minds to see and to hear something of the divine life - to peer into that hidden realm, that realm behind the thin veil that separates us from the angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven who surround the throne of God - God who glorifies them and they return that glory in their worship and adoration of the Source of life, light, beauty, power and love unimaginable.

Today we celebrate in our worship St. Michael and All Angels - who inhabit that realm unseen and yet not unknown.

The Holy Bible - God's word to us - is full of accounts of the ministry of angels, from the opening chapters of Genesis to the final chapters of Revelation. We learn that angels are spiritual creatures of a higher order than human beings. We learn that there are different species of angels forming a wonderful hierarchy which we will come to know more fully one day. The Bible speaks of the Cherubims (e.g. Gen. 3:24; Ezek. 10) and Seraphims (Isa 6), of the Archangels Michael (Dan. 10; Jude 1:9; Rev 12:7), Gabriel (Dan. 8:16, 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26) and Raphael (see Tobit in the Apocrypha) and innumerable hosts of unnamed angels with their various ministries:

- Michael, which means "who is like God", we learn from Daniel, is a warrior, who guards God's people Israel in the Old Testament and, as we have heard in today's lesson from Revelation, is the guardian of the New Israel, the Church.
- In the Gospel we have heard of the special ministry of guardian angels. Jesus says, "I tell you in heaven their angels [the angels of the little ones] do always behold the face of my Father in heaven." Jesus is saying that the smallest and weakest, the humblest, have angels that have the most direct access to the Father to seek redress for wrongs.

Angels are gifted, as we are, with free will. Some have chosen to fall away from their love of God - Satan and his angels. Yet others have remained true. And so there is a battle.

We have seen this battle portrayed wonderfully in the Pageant of Redemption last night. From the point of view of eternity, the battle is won "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" and yet as part of God's providential ordering of creation, from our perspective in time, the battle is allowed to continue, for a time, on earth.

And we know something of this battle on three levels:

- We know the battle in our own souls, the more we grow in the spiritual life. It is the battle to see through the lies and deceits and temptations of Satan and his angels who would entrap us and then enslave us in sin. Yet, we are to expect also that when we are exhausted by these battles fought daily, we may be ministered to by angels to strengthen and restore us, as our Lord experienced after 40 days of temptation in the wilderness (Matt 4:11).
- We fight the battle in our relationships with other people - within families, friendships, at school or at work, in our daily lives in society. Satan and his angels try to sever our relationships, making

us hurt one another and discouraging us from forbearing, from forgiving one another. But we seek to hold before our eyes that kingdom of heaven, God's kingdom, praying that it may be established not only in our own souls but in our midst.

- The battle is being fought at higher levels too - as the Church and as societies seek to remain faithful to God, to what is true, to what is just, to what is love. St. Paul reminds us that we fight "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:10-18). Some of you will have heard in Fr. Lasky's class of the martyrs over the centuries and we have all seen in the real martyrdoms portrayed in the movie - End of the Spear - on Wednesday night of those who have been engaged in those higher battles. You see they were engaged in the battle through love not just against the sin of individuals but against ideas that had taken a stranglehold over whole societies.

The wonder and glory of God is that the battle is won at all levels - in our souls, in our relations with others, and in the Church and society - as we are reminded in our Lesson, as we wash ourselves in the Blood of the Lamb and bear witness in our lives to the Gospel of Truth, in other words, as we participate in that angelic battle. And we are encouraged knowing that both in our own battles and in the battles in high places, there are many more that fight with us than are against us.

In our churches, in our worship, we perhaps know more certainly than in any other place on earth both the victory in that battle that is assured to us in Christ, and something of that realm just beyond our sight. Here in worship we are lifted up in prayer and transported to eternity. Here we join with angelic voices to proclaim, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of thy glory." (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8) And, at the end of our worship when we sing the *Gloria*, we join in with the chorus of angels that first announced to the shepherds the incarnation of our Lord in a manger in Bethlehem: "Glory be to God on high, and in earth peace, good will towards men." (Luke 2:14)

Let us pray that in this coming year we will all have a greater awareness of the ministrations of angels who ascend and descend upon the Son of Man (John 1:51). Let us pray that St. Michael and all angels might be our fierce guardians, and they are fierce, from all evil. And may God grant that our souls, being washed and purified continually in the Blood of the Lamb we may, with all angels and archangels, be courageous bearers of the Truth to the world.

And they loved not their lives unto the death. Amen.

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