

THE RECTOR'S CHRONICLE

A NEWSLETTER OF THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL

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Dear Parishioners and Friends,

Like many parishes these days, St Michael's could use some more people. The evidence at this point is that they are not going to find us; rather, we will need to find them. This raises the question: what do we tell people when we invite them to St Michael's? A principle of advertising which has been around for a while is: taste doesn't sell steak; sizzle sells steak. In other words, the advertising should focus on some strikingly attractive sidelight rather than on the real substance. People do this with churches as well – in the American marketplace of religion (as Fr Toon used to call it). One parish might tout its splendid liturgy, another its music program, another its activities for youth, another its support for foreign missions, another its local service programs, another its short service and convenient parking. In a way, we used to do this ourselves, when we highlighted our unique, landmark building at St James the Less.

Now, however, we don't have much sizzle to use in our efforts to attract new people. That is perhaps not a bad thing, since it can push us to reconsider what we are "selling." Why is it that we want other people to join us at St Michael's? Paul gives us a clue, in a verse from II Corinthians (which we looked at recently in the Wednesday Bible study). "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." (4:7) Paul is speaking here specifically of the apostolic ministry and of his own ministry: he is the earthen vessel, the Gospel is the treasure. But, as numerous commentators both ancient and modern point out, the principle is of wider applicability. It is true of every Christian: we have within us the treasure of the saving love of God. The treasure is concealed within our fallen and unworthy bodies and souls, as people used to hide treasure in unassuming vessels for safety. But insofar as we are Christians, the treasure is there – and we should be aware both of the disparity between the treasure and the vessel (which, as Paul points out, in no way denigrates or undermines the Gospel), and be grateful for the treasure.

So what are we to "sell" about St Michael's? We have no great building (of our own), no choir or exceptional music program, no day school, no crowds of eager worshipers filling a large building and proving that we are worthy and successful. What do we have (besides air conditioning, free parking, and a great bunch of folk)? We have the Gospel. We have the greatest of all treasures. We have Christ, the assurance of God's love, the key which opens heaven. We have the meaning of life which everyone needs and seeks whether they recognize it or not.

Paul's point in II Corinthians is not just that the the earthen vessels conceal the treasure, but that the poorness of the vessel reveals the power and greatness of the treasure. We need not fear that the unworthiness of the vessel will undermine the power of the Gospel. We need not make the vessel worthy (golden rather than earthen) before we proclaim the treasure. More, the contrast between the two is itself a testimony to the greatness of the treasure. When Paul lists his "infirmities", which include his lack of success and reputation in the world, and his worldly weakness, he does so not to call attention to himself, but to exalt the Gospel. Christ can (and does) use even such a vessel as Paul, not by making him respectable and strong in the world, but by the strength and glory of the Gospel working through the despicable weakness of the man.

One of the dangers for us is that we pay too much (or the wrong kind of) attention to the earthen vessels. It is all too easy to murmur about the vessel being too earthen, not up to our standards of glory. We may insist on a glorious vessel rather than being content with the glory of the treasure within. We may beg God for more outward glory for St Michael's: for the success of numbers, for a building of our own, for greater prosperity. We may complain that we lack these things, and tell Him in our prayers that we really cannot go on unless He grants them. This is dangerous because it misses the point. It mistakes the outward container for the inner substance, and emphasizes the outward and transitory at the expense of the inward and eternal. It also denigrates the greatness of the inner substance by its emphasis on the vessel – though this is not usually the intention. It forgets that the meanness of the earthen vessel is actually a testimony to the greatness of the treasure within.

It is not wrong, of course, to want more people at St Michael's, or better music, or more programs and service to others. These are good things, and I trust that we all desire and pray for them. I do. Yet

our desires should not blind us to the reality of the treasure we already possess, by God's generosity. Nor should our lack make us discontented. We already have what is essential.

The treasure may be *hidden* in the earthen vessels: but that is the way God has designed things. We do not bring the treasure out into the open by becoming gold and silver vessels, but by admitting, even proclaiming, the disparity between the vessel and the treasure. We can be honest about the meanness of the vessel – that we are few and poor and lacking in property – because we trust to the overwhelming glory of the treasure. There is no shame in being earthen when the treasure within is so great. It is the treasure that matters – and of that we should never be ashamed.

Animal Blessing

With remarkable foresight, we are planning a St Francis Day animal blessing this year. I say remarkable, since last year, I did not think of it until it was too late to do anything about having the service. This year, fortunately, one of my neighbors in Mount Airy asked about it, which served as a timely reminder. The Blessing will be on Saturday, October 3rd, at the rectory (in the front yard, assuming the weather cooperates) at 11. Please bring your pets, properly controlled or contained (we don't want any casualties). There is a special blessing for sick animals, so let me know at the time if your pet is ill. Since we expect some of our neighbors, it would be great to have parishioners here to welcome them. I probably don't need to add that we do this sometime around the 4th of October because that is the Feast of St Francis, who is known for his devotion to all of God's creation, as well as his devotion to the Cross.

Winter Schedule

We are back to our “winter” Mass schedule of two Masses on Sunday. With the coming of Fall, various other things are starting up as well. Sunday School starts on September 20th. We are fortunate to have Martha Eischen teaching a confirmation class for four of our young people. Sung Mass returns the following Sunday, as does “winter” coffee hour. Barbara Freeman organizes the coffee hour (and I should recognize her efforts more often: thanks, Barbara!), and she will be happy to receive offers of assistance, whether bringing things, or setting up, or cleaning up afterward.

The weekday Masses continue apace: Tuesday and Thursday at 6 p.m., Wednesday (with Healing) at 10 a.m., Friday at 9 a.m. and Saturday at 9:30. It is a privilege to be able to have a daily Mass, one for which I am exceedingly grateful. I am also grateful to all those who support this worship with their presence. In one sense, the purpose of the Church is the worship of God, and especially the worship in the Mass, the form of worship given by Christ to the apostles at the Last Supper. Having the daily Mass helps to keep the parish focused on its basic purpose in the world: worshiping God in the way He has appointed. This is no less true now, as we worship in considerably more modest surroundings than when we were at St James. Of course, while the point of all worship is God, He has nevertheless arranged things so that we benefit enormously from worshipping Him. What a blessing it is to be able to attend upon the altar most any day we want, there to forget our worldly burdens (or better: to lay them down at the foot of the Cross) and be refreshed by our Lord and Savior in His loving Presence and in the Holy Communion! The weekday Masses have a greater intimacy to them, and the simplicity and smaller scale make it easier for many people to enter more deeply into the worship. It takes some effort, of course, since it is rarely all that convenient to worship at a weekday Mass. But God repays our efforts.

We will observe the Feast of Title on October 4th, the Sunday within the Octave of St Michael and All Angels. On the Feast itself (September 29th), there will be a Mass at the rectory at 6. There will be a modest supper at the rectory for those of you who can come to Mass that night. Please let us know so we can plan enough food. We are grateful to St Michael for his protection since he became our patron. You may already use the classic request for his intercession: “Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil; May God rebuke him, we humbly pray; and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all evil spirits who wander through the world for the ruin of souls. Amen.”

Kudos

Thanks goes this month to:

- my mother for doing the last *Chronicle* mailing (and probably this one).
- Fr Johnson for supplying while I was away in August, and to John Hansell, Andrew Ducsik, and others for looking after various things at that time.
- Barbara Freeman and many others (including Janice Wilson, Jana McCann, Angela Johnson, Pat Lincoln, Leslie Altena) for doing the iced tea and lemonade after Mass this summer, rain or shine, outside or in.

Faithfully,

