

First Sermon as Bishop, January 19, 2014
Cathedral of St John the Baptist, St John's, Newfoundland

It is a privilege today to deliver my first sermon as Diocesan Bishop here at this Cathedral of St John the Baptist, the Mother Church of our Diocese. I want to acknowledge the great support I have received from this church family and also from your Dean and Curate as I prepared to be consecrated Bishop on Friday. I also note the presence of our Diocesan Executive Officer here today, Archdeacon Sandra Tilley, and I acknowledge her strong support at this time of transition. I thank the Cathedral Parish for their donation toward the episcopal ring I will wear. This parish, along with the last two parishes I served as Rector, contributed to the creation of the ring. It was made locally and incorporates symbols of both Newfoundland and Labrador in its design with a codfish on one side and a Labrador spruce twig on the other side.

Since November I have received quite a few letters, e-mails and telephone calls. I can't count the number of them who have extended not congratulations, but condolences, upon my election as bishop. In the minds of some, it seems, this occasion is not one for celebration but for fearful contemplation as if what I face at this time should inspire trembling and dread. Such people have been surprised to learn that my overall feeling since November has been one of peace and good expectation. I actually feel quite hopeful for our community as we move forward. To quote scripture, my hope is not in humans but in God, and in God all things are possible.

What we face today as Christians, as challenging as it is, is actually not any worse, and generally quite better than what the Christian Church has faced in the past, and in some places, in the present. There has never really been a good time to be a Christian, much less a Christian bishop, and a little historical consciousness goes a long way right now. When I consider that our ancestors in the faith regularly died deaths as martyrs rather than renounce Christ, when I consider what Christians face today in places across the Middle East and much of Africa our challenges pale in comparison.

I found a letter I received just after my election from our Primate, Archbishop Fred Hiltz, quite helpful. I quote from part of it: "By way of encouragement, let me share with you the pastoral counsel which the 9th Primate of our church, Howard Clarke, offered to Ted Scott when he was elected as the Bishop of Kootenay: *'You will find your consecration an unforgettable experience. Any call from God is a frightening and glorious experience and always about that there is a note of mystery. We know little about the ways in which prayer works, but we know it works. We know equally little about the economy of grace yet I am sure that grace is abounding. Just put your trust in God and go ahead with the work. You will find yourself marvelously and wondrously equipped for your task.'*"

Perhaps another reason I feel such peace and hopefulness today is because of where I draw much of my inspiration: They are the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the Holy Father of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis. I am reminded today of Archbishop Welby's sermon when he became the heir to St Augustine of Canterbury last year and spoke of the Holy Spirit giving him courage. I have come to recognize courage, grounded not in human ability, but in God, as a gift of the Spirit. I am a priest who is conscious of having received the Holy Spirit and in the recent past have finally learned the value of giving praise to that Spirit. When the Spirit is praised it responds in unexpected ways.

My other inspiration, Pope Francis, has startled our world with his departure from the expected and his call for the Catholic Church to focus less upon ethical concerns and more upon simply being the Church in the world. Francis is considered today as something of a radical, and I guess that is true if one understands that to be radical is really to return to one's roots. Please remember that Francis' roots are in another Francis, he of Assisi. To quote Thomas Rosica, "We can easily envision Francis of Assisi in that idyllic, medieval Umbrian hilltop town and mythologize about what really happened back in his day. But too often Francis' radical message is

lost and we reduce him to a gentle, whimsical hippie who fed birds, smelled flowers and tamed wild wolves. We easily forget that in reality, Assisi's favorite son was and is the model of a radical Christian."

As a young man Francis of Assisi heard Jesus say, "Go and repair my church" and he spent his life doing that, leaving behind a large and growing community of followers later known as Franciscans to continue the work. To further quote Rosica, "Many of us have spent the past months finding similarities between Francis of Assisi and Francis of Buenos Aires, who took up residence in a guest house in Vatican City rather than the papal apartment in the Apostolic Palace" ... We see a "world leader who speaks the truth to power, walks his talk, and names idolatry and greed for what they are. Here's a bold and courageous shepherd who lifts up the poor and tells us that if they are not part of our lives, then we are a sad and even doomed lot ... He wants the church to be an instrument of reconciliation and welcome, a church capable of warming hearts, a church that is not bent over on herself but always seeking those on the periphery and those who are lost, a church capable of leading people home." To quote Francis himself: "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."

Our Archbishop, Justin Welby, inspired me with similar words in a sermon in Monterrey, Mexico, on August 13 of last year when he talked of the challenges before us today: "It is a dangerous place, a narrow path we walk as Anglicans at present. On one side is the steep fall into an absence of any core beliefs, a chasm where we lose touch with God, and thus we rely only on ourselves and our own message. On the other side there is a vast fall into a ravine of intolerance and cruel exclusion. It is for those who claim all truth, and exclude any who question. When we fall into this place, we lose touch with human beings and create a small church, or rather many small churches – divided, ineffective in serving the poor, the hungry and the suffering, incapable of living with each other, and incomprehensible to those outside the church..."

In terms of my own faith journey, I consider myself essentially a parish priest who has been formed in parish ministry and I pay tribute today to the four principal parishes that have formed me as a priest: The Parish of Lake Melville in Labrador, and the Parishes of Arnold's Cove, The Ascension, and the Good Shepherd in Newfoundland.

I am reminded as I stand before you this morning of other times and places in my ministry when I delivered other first sermons; to congregations and parishes where I had been sent to serve over the past 27 years. Such sermons served not only to introduce me to the people but also to set the tone of my ministry with them. It was not uncommon for me to challenge a congregation at the beginning of my ministry if I believed there were places where they needed to grow. But, the truth is, I was really challenging myself so that I would have a reference point for all that followed. In a sense, I am doing the same this morning, but on a bigger scale: challenging our Diocese, for this sermon will be distributed to the clergy this afternoon and discussed with them tomorrow in my first meeting with them.

I have been trained as a practical theologian ... but I didn't start out that way. A practical theologian focuses upon the ordinary person and their experience of God and seeks to understand it. I was not initially educated to do that – to read theology through the lives of everyday people – but instead through the words of recognized and credentialed theologians, ancient and modern. Yes, Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas have much to teach us *about* God, but I am much more interested right now in what Amy, Allan and Andy have to teach me about their relationship *with* God. As important as the fathers, mothers and scholars of the church are to us, it is a time now for us to listen closely to the people all around us and seek to understand their experience. It is only when we listen closely to what they are saying to us that we can truly enter into that conversation that is so needed today. Let us be a listening church. We may even discover that those who seemingly have turned their back on organized religion continue to believe at a deeper level that the church still contains the mystery of all that is good in human life. They are poisoned by the failures of the Christian Church and yet have not entirely

abandoned the belief that there is something very good about this community and something worth knowing, if only they could find their way back.

There is no doubt that our church contains brokenness within it these days. Leonard Cohen sings of there being a crack in everything but it is through such cracks that the light gets in. Our brokenness may actually be a blessing if it enables God's light to get in. And remember that we are a community called to seek the broken in society. We give shelter to those who have no other shelter in the storms of life. We defend those who have nobody else to defend them. It is little wonder that we stumble so often and grow weary from time to time. We are a community of the broken and imperfect, including our clergy and other leaders. But we are also a community that lives in expectation of healing. *When we get it wrong we get it very wrong, but believe me when we get it right we get it very right.* I was moved during the recent power outages by the way in which many municipalities set up "warm places" for people to go for shelter, food, support, and companionship. What a wonderful image in the midst of that trying time. What a wonderful image for our church to adopt for every time. I am reminded of the words of the theologian Jürgen Moltmann who once wrote that, "God as love is experienced not in large organizations and institutions but in communities in which people can embrace each other." A man in prison once taught me these words: "Be kind to that person next to you because believe me they are fighting a hard battle every day."

And just who are we as a faith community? We are a church that represents 25% of the population of Newfoundland and Labrador. Granted, there are different degrees of that membership, but one in four of us claims to be an Anglican. And we form fabulous communities that include those of us whose ancestors come from other places, mainly England and Ireland, but also other places. And we are so proud of the many aboriginal people in Labrador and elsewhere who claim this church as their own. I will always be grateful that my ordained ministry began in Labrador. It was important to me on Friday past that the Lord's Prayer be said in Inuktitut so that the presence of our native people might be affirmed and celebrated.

We are a church that provides a Christian presence in almost every single community in this province. Historically, the churches of Newfoundland and Labrador have been one of the two most important institutions in the life of the people (the other being government although the churches were the first to arrive) providing both identity and community. Indeed, in the 18th and 19th Centuries it was the churches and not government that established and staffed both the education and health care systems; a reality that persisted into the 20th Century. Today, churches continue to have a key role in the social wellbeing of people even as the churches come to terms with the great changes affecting the society they serve. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the most common social network for people to belong to next to their family, remains their church. With a population here that is still largely rural and relatively isolated, churches are frequently the only formal institution left in some communities. Schools, hospitals, post offices, and the infrastructure associated with modern government services have disappeared from many towns but churches remain.

We have been and continue to be a church of the people, a pastoral church that invites people to draw close and walks with them. Let us continue to embrace those who come our way in search of a home. Let us be a church that relieves people's burdens, rather than a church that adds to their burdens. I believe we must say to those who are searching these words that I first preached a long, long time ago. They weren't originally mine although I have modified them several times over the years. I believed these words then; I believe them all the more today. We aren't there yet but this is what I believe our church needs to say to all persons who come to it:

We will meet you right where you are in life. We celebrate the fact that your journey has brought you to a new encounter with God through us.

We understand that you probably bring some brokenness in your life to our community and we pledge not to add to that brokenness in any way but to accept you with open arms, to walk with you to heal

whatever needs to be healed in your life, and to love you just as our Lord has loved us. We believe that there is nothing in your life that cannot be forgiven and healed by God. As you walk with us you will come to believe that too.

We will teach you about God's love through our words, and most especially through our deeds, and we will make room for you within the fellowship of our Christian community. No matter what we may discover about you in the future – either good or bad – our commitment to you will never change.

And because we hold faithfulness to be the highest possible good in human relationships, we promise to be faithful to you, to care for you, and to never ever let you go. In return, we will expect of you the highest possible standard of faithfulness in your relationship with God and with us.

And, finally, our church commits to celebrate with you all that is worthy of celebration in your life, and to care for you and your family should life become difficult in any way. You belong to this church. This church belongs to you. Let us learn to love each other in new ways. Teach us how to love you. We will teach you how to love God.

The church that can finally say that to all persons who come to it is the church that I want to belong to. On this day, less than 48 hours after becoming your bishop, I offer that vision to you.

Geoff Peddle