



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

National Indigenous Day of Prayer

Sunday, June 21, 2020

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 40:25-31 & John 1:1-18

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of my favourite – and simplest, though not to say simplistic - theological quotes comes from, wait for it, the lead singer of U2: Bono. Yup – I know – queue the eyeroll, but don't knock him, he's a very cool dude. Not because of his singing ability but because of his responsible use of celebrity and because in fact he's a rather fine theologian as it turns out.

He did an interview a few years back and talked about his faith. When asked who Jesus was, he said that God sent Jesus to us to show us what God's love is like. And I've never forgotten that. Turns out that's pretty much what the first verses of the Gospel of John that we call the prologue are saying too.

So we all know these verses from the Gospel. I could almost recite them from memory so many times have I either read them or helped someone else read them for the annual service of 9 lessons and carols. John's very Greek syntax has almost got the better of many a reader. These verses are the culmination and capstone of that yearly service – and for good reason. They say some important – core and irreducible things about who Jesus the Christ is.

That they function this way is interesting in itself because that's one of the jobs of a prologue or introduction in Ancient near Eastern writing. As one scholar says, they give us the plot or outline of the Gospel. And in John's Gospel, the prologue tells us what God is up to. And the prologue guides the reader (us) to see God's hand in the historical persons and events in the story we're about to hear. It functions, we're told "as the lens through which the gospel must be read."¹

¹ <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2011/in-the-beginning-the-importance-of-the-prologue-to-the-gospel-of-john>

So - what scholars tell us is what “that means is that before we meet Jesus in Jerusalem or in Galilee, we meet him “In the beginning ... with God” whispering over the waters at Creation.

And of course we know this because we’ve just come through Trinity Sunday a couple of weeks ago and reminded ourselves that the same God who is our Creator is the same God in the Incarnation is the same God who guides and protects us: the three in one.

So this isn’t an abstract theological statement, but really important information that we need in order to make sense of the actual historical person and work of Jesus that is described in the rest of the Gospel.²

We also learn the basic plot of the Gospel. Here’s the Cole’s notes version of John: creation no longer knows its Creator and is in darkness. But the Light has arrived in the world. The Light is of course, Jesus. The Light will make the Father known to the world, as the divine and profoundly loving Word of God. All of this expands on what was told to us in the Old Testament – all the stories of how God sought over and over again a relationship with God’s children – longed for them and now, God has been even more loving in sending God’s son. (1:16-17).³

Or, as Bono put it, God sent Jesus to show us what God’s love looks like.

Right. That being so - there are so many more subjects worth exploring in these few verses that it can be difficult to decide just which direction we want to explore this morning. I mean, do we talk about the connection between the first verse of John with Genesis, and notice together St. John’s bold claim to be writing a new Genesis? Remaking the world? Because it’s pretty obvious that those words, “In the beginning” are a very clear echo of the acts of the Creator of the world.

Or should we think about the meaning of the Incarnation; how Jesus is God with skin on?

But maybe we’ll do those another day. Because today, this morning, the verse that captures my imagination is this one:

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

I don’t know about you, but I need those words. I’m finding them really important. Because you know, they might not feel obvious to us these days. They might not feel quite like the statement of fact that my faith leads me to believe they are – they might feel like more of a hope, a wish, or a prayer these days.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

I had to laugh in a grim sort of way at a headline last month that was lamenting the state of this year. It said: “as if 2020 wasn’t bad enough – A pandemic and now we have to contend with murder hornets?” But, as we now know, 2020 had more darkness in store: it took an even worse turn with the murder of Mr. George Floyd.

But “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

I’m hanging on to the confidence of these words. On the one hand, it’s the declaration of fact: the light of God is stronger than the darkness of evil; it dispels and even destroys darkness. At the same time, these words are also a promise: that even when it seems otherwise and that the darkness has won and covers the light – and the briefest scan of the headlines can almost convince us of that – yet the light continues to shine and the darkness has not won. That’s what the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ tells us.

The darkness has not won.

The Gospel tells us that Love wins.

Every. Time.

Loves wins.

I’m hanging on to that.

So for seekers after justice and righteousness I think this verse is life.

Because even the darkness we have been experiencing these last months cannot overcome the light. While there is nothing good about COVID-19, in itself it is evil, it’s presence in our world has revealed to us the preciousness of our relationships and the profound importance of our faith and our faith communities. There is no way to describe Mr. Floyd’s murder as anything except cruel and finding its roots in the evils of racism. But the light shone on that act and did not allow the darkness to cover it up this time. We have lifted up his name as a rallying cry for a renewed and movement against anti-black racism – and against racism of all kinds.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Today we celebrate National Indigenous Day of Prayer. In our Canadian context, the systemic racism that Indigenous people experience also comes from the darkness of sin – sin we have allowed. This is a day when we shine a light on the legacy of pain from the residential school system and recommit ourselves to systemic change. This is a day when we pray for the wisdom and will to beat back the darkness of ignorance, and prejudice that daily confront our Indigenous siblings. This is a day when we reach for the light...

The impulse toward the light that is the very nature of God. And as we're formed as disciples of Jesus - God with skin on - we have to live into the confidence of that verse: that light is stronger than darkness, love stronger than hate, life stronger than death, justice stronger than prejudice and racism.

And in fact, we are purveyors of that truth. Deacons, the laity, the people of God, priests, licensed lay workers and bishops, must live and work to make that truth known and tangible and real. Just as God has revealed in Jesus not only who God is - so do those who are Jesus' followers work to do the same - to reveal the heart of God that we have seen in Jesus to all those with whom we come into contact.

Because of our limitations, God becomes human that we may see God, experience God, be changed by God's ways - for they sure aren't our ways. In Jesus, God comes near us - becomes accessible to us - the eternal and unchangeable God became finite and vulnerable in order to become truly available and truly known to us. And because we have seen God in Jesus, we're made stronger, and braver, both to live with hope as well as share with others the hope that is within us.

St. John reminds us of God's decision to become one of us, to take on our life so that we can live in the light.

I want to suggest that as Christians, we are called to do the same for our siblings:

- to educate ourselves about our privilege;
- to work to break down the obstructions that prevent us all from flourishing - not just some of us; and
- to question our assumptions and to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as she lightens our darkened sight.

All in order to love our neighbours: our Black and Indigenous neighbours - as ourselves.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.