Homily during Time of Protest and Hurt

July 4, 2021

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*(this is based on a transcription of the recorded homily)*

“*Our eyes are on the Lord until he has mercy on us*”

There are so many places that were told to go with our eyes right now. We are told many ways to read and to interpret events as we respond to these remarkable last two weeks. Once again in the lives of our First Nations people a consciousness rises through reawakened attention to deep pain that has wounded and wounds that community. Deep pain and a consciousness that has been normalized, routinized by the communities that surround First Nations. We think that if we teach about the legacy of Residential Schools in our schools then we have done our work. We think that if we have fulfilled the obligations that legal means of redress demanded of us and the law required of us - agreements that we made as a culture, as a government, and as a Church - that that is enough. Because we live each of us with our own struggles in this bounteous country that has so much it is very easy to be inattentive to this pain and to see past one of the great wounds that was inflicted by people who looked like us and proclaimed the same faith as you and I upon the First Nations.

Oh, this is not about middle-class guilt which allows us to feel bad, to write posts, to make signs, and to yell. Thereby we find a place where our own life struggles can somehow take over - like parasites feeding on suffering– the struggles of others. Thus, people who have their own struggles with faith, - “this is why I do not go to church” - and people who have their own spiritual brokenness and relationships gone awry get angry as ‘allies’. And in getting angry they assume that that’s enough. This is the way of modern middle-class activism: I *feel* something, I *said* something, therefore I’ve *done* something. Really? You have *done* something…? Hmmm.

But this is not our way. We are those who are called to listen to the prophetic word as uncomfortable as it may be. And it so uncomfortable to walk past the front of our church, our beautiful church building, and see there bloodied hands. We are called to walk by that jarring paint and not interpret it through the visions, of politics, of personal pride, nor through the lens of trying to find the historical truth - as important as all that might be. We are called to read these signs with humble eyes as a *prophetic word.* You and I come here to read the signs through Christ just as we do at every critical moment in all of our lives: at big social upheavals or during private devastations like divorce; in crushing poverty or of being accused and hauled before law courts; of moving from one country to another, of having lives turned upside down; (I look around here and see many immigrants who are no longer in their homelands, their birth lands anymore.) Where do we go you and I? We come here and “*Our eyes look to the Lord until he has mercy upon us*”. We are those who do not allow the evil one to get us thinking about anything except God. That is the way of the Accuser: he wants to get us to think about anything except God. We know the mercy of God and so we come here to the Lord and once again we are taught that it is not in newspapers, it is not through the comments of pundits, it is not through any of our great intellectual studies and policies that we will find the way to live with hope in the world. It is only in the sacred Scripture - only in the sacred Scripture - not newspapers but the Scripture that we find the mercy of God.

“*Son of man, I am sending you to the children of Israel to a nation of rebels that has rebelled against me they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day, their descendants are impudent and stubborn.*”

Those descendants are us. We are those who are blessed by our ancestors who came and broke this land and settled us here. But there was also a transgression against the Lord. There was deep transgression against the Lord. What transgression? We became powerful and swept away the First Nations among whom we were planted. It continues for it is one of the consequences of the constant transgression arising from relying only on ourselves insisting on developing a culture that considers success primarily in *material* terms: so we look to the bigger farm, the better education, the better material lives of our children. This is the way of the world. Wake up! No one is saved by their bank account. No one is saved by the number of ‘likes’ on Facebook. No one is saved and lives a full life when they are crawling and stepping on others to get ahead.

We are being sent today to a nation that now *explicitly* rebels against God. Not subtly and implicitly as in the past by saying “I believe in Jesus” and then building Residential schools; but by saying “I don’t believe in Jesus and we are a post-national country where everybody gets to do whatever they want” and then establishing school curriculums to impose this. This is a nation often led by those who teach that there is no ‘great Truth’. They insist that, “everything is permitted … except for that which we decide we will not forgive.” This is a nation - our nation - that rebels against God. And we too are rebels and we too rebel against God when we see our faith and our churches as a comfortable nice easy spaces where we can build nice wonderful schools …that are empty shells. How can we tell that our schools are empty shells, that our Church has failed? Because we continue to fail children just as we failed those First Nations children by hauling them out of their homes and away from their parents, and by going along with government policy that once said that the “final solution of the Indian problem” was to be found in those Industrial schools and now says that the “final solution of the Religion problem” will be found in shiny Technological schools.

Debbie survived one of those Industrial schools. Debbie is a leader at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish. Debbie said to me that the seven years that she was in that Residential school at Duck Lake the one thing she never heard from any teacher was her name, ‘Debbie’. She was “1014” … *1014!*  Who calls people by numbers? Who is it who proclaiming that Jesus is the Lord calls anyone by a number? There is something deeply ungodly because it is dehumanizing in doing this. We cannot smugly point fingers. Too easily people reduce others to a number: whether tattooed on an arm, or imprinted on a Social Insurance card. Is this not the way banks ensnare people in the bottom line and could give a damn about someone’s name? Is this not the way of “justice” systems that pick and choose which voices to hear? Is this this not our way when we do not see the *faces* of people nor bother to understand them? This happens both with the well-established before the newly arrived and with immigrants confronted by people who have been here a long time. We do this by quickly labeling those struggling with mental illness, and by writing off people in our families that we have concluded are pretty bad news. In these ways we do not call people by their names – instead we give them a “number” – a neat “idea” of who they are – and fit them into our lives. We continue to do that in our schools our schools to which children are entrusted by parents (many of whom who don’t really care about practice of the faith) and from which the vast majority come out at the end of their education never to come to church again except for the odd funeral and wedding … maybe. That is the consequence visited on any community of Christians who plays the game of the world. I am preaching to myself, the Holy Spirit is convicting me, because I – we – have those marks on the front [of the church] and no matter how much sandblasting we do we cannot erase that shame. Because …

Because … not because of someone’s sin in the *past*. Ah, it is really easy to tame shame through the cheap middle-class morality of our time: “Look how bad people were in the past and we are victims of that.” And so *shame* becomes a way of justifying … me. And so once again it’s ‘me, me, me’. No, brothers and sisters, we must ask what do ***I*** do that mars the face of Jesus? What have I done that leaves marks on the front of His church?

We must ask this because you and I are sent out into this world to proclaim the good news and they are going to say to us a modern version of what Jesus’ townsfolk said to Him in the Gospel today:   
 “hmm, what are these people talking about? Who are Catholics to talk?

Who are *you* to talk?

‘See mom, that’s why I don’t go to church because you are part of a shameful community’.

We know who you are:

you are ‘*James and Joseph’s and Judas and Simon’s brother and relation’*,

we know about your Residential schools, we’ve read about your abusive priests,

we know that you have lots of hidden money and live in comfort,

we know who you are.

There in the newspaper is who you are. We are not going to listen to you”.

What do we do in the face of that? how do we respond right now?

By listening to the Lord *until he has mercy*.

Our parish is named for St. Paul, the patron in heaven who has protected us during this pandemic, who has watched over us during wars during other pandemics, and who has wept as we have participated in the ways of the world. St. Paul, though, St. Paul says tonight: there is an exceptional character to the revelation that I have had, I have seen God, “*but lest I become too elated in knowing Christ Jesus, too puffed up, too righteous in myself, the Lord has given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me something to keep me humble*” Why is this? Why would God do that? Why would the Lord Jesus ever allow us His holy people to have such brokenness weigh upon us?

Lest we think in worldly ways with only ‘ideas’,

Lest we think, “I understand the Lord and they don’t”, “I am a believer they are not”,

“I am cultured they are not”, “I am a Christian they are hell-bound and broken”

For if we are *too righteous* then we cannot bring Good News. If we live *puffed up* we don’t see people and we don’t see how Christ sees people. How Christ loves people. How Christ loves us. How we are to love people. People are messy. People have warts. People have brokenness. People thrill us. People disappoint us.

Any parent who has thought, “my child is the opportunity I have to fulfil my idea of what a person should be” will be dashed on the rock of every child they have.

And that is what Good News love looks like it. It doesn’t engage ideas. It isn’t satisfied with signs and protests or fundraising or patting on the back or attending gatherings.

Love, at least Jesus who is love, surrenders *to be humbly present in love* with others

St. Paul gives us tonight - and I know going on but I think it’s important for us to hear this – Paul gives us tonight the only instance in all of writing in which he tells us word for word what the Risen Jesus said to him. In no other place does he quote the Risen Lord, not even in his conversion story does he write that Jesus said to him, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me*”. That is Luke writing in Acts. The only place that Paul teaches us by quoting what Jesus says to him is in the reading tonight. Here are the words:

“*my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness*”.

*“For power is made perfect in weakness”* That sisters and brothers is not the way the world understands power. Power is to win. Power is to be right and to be seen to be right. Power is to have physical bodies that are gloriously healthy. Power is to have your words listened to.

But we see a Cross and that for worldly power is nothing but a sign of weakness. And some members of our Church couldn’t accept that so they took that Cross and they beat First Nations children over the head with it and they broke their hearts. Jesus didn’t do that. Our community did that. I do that whenever I think that power comes from being right, whenever I think that true power comes through good money and a vaccinated and content community. That’s not how our God saves. His grace is sufficient brothers and sisters. Generation after generation of Christians had to learn individually and as a community that all that matters is Jesus. Now it is our time to learn this again. It is not that we be respected as a Catholic Church, it is not even that we be celebrated as those who manifest Christ Jesus’ goodness it is that we listen to Him ourselves and are those who are transformed by our relationship with Christ so that we live in the world with an authority that comes from “doing whatever Christ tells us”. We are going to hear the end of Mass a letter from the Saskatchewan bishops speaking about a renewal a new attempt to raise some funds and money. But remember, money goes like this … snap

Tonight, I have here a stone that was given to me by the young woman who - first in the middle of the night and then in the middle of the day - put her red painted hands on my beautiful … *our* beautiful church. We sat together her and I on a blanket across the street. She prayed and I prayed. And we together decided that this rock of reconciliation which is heavy to carry alone is no longer just to be carried by her and her people. Nor is it to be thrown at us but rather it is to be carried together.

This is familiar for us Catholics. We know this because we have discovered that every weakness that we have, that weighs us down, is impossible to carry just on our own with our medications and self-help books and good projects and great counselling, with Reformation and Renovation. The weakness that we carry – shame and sin and hurt - is too much. We look to the Cross and see that Jesus’s hands – not just marked but pierced by betrayal - are underneath our hands holding this rock … and every rock. He is helping us carry it. Sometimes when we can’t even bear to touch it He carries it for us, saying to us always, “*My grace is sufficient for you*”.