

Sermon for June 20th, 2021, National Aboriginal Day of Prayer
St. George's Cathedral, Kingston, ON
Major the Rev. Canon Catherine Askew

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

The beginning years of my ordained ministry began in the ancient, dry mountains of the British Columbia interior. It was not the British Columbia that tourists think of with lush, towering forests and wide ocean vistas. This part of British Columbia has mountains and rivers that had attracted the gold rush in the beginning years of settler movement into the province. It was where the slow-moving Thompson River collided into the mighty Fraser River.

This first place where I ministered is called Lytton and the parish boundaries stretched for 100 kms on both sides of the Fraser River. On the east side of the river, I travelled up and down the Trans Canada, along roads that had been built by the Chinese workers of the railway and also by those seeking gold. Along the west side of the river the roads were winding dirt roads barely wide enough for one car in spots, connecting tiny communities spread along traditional routes, established long before any European presence. Ancient pictographs can be found in closely guarded sacred locations on this side of the river, drawn on rockfaces surrounded by scraggly sagebrush.

It was, and still is, a beautiful place. But it is a place of pain, of sorrow, and of trauma. In Lytton, the Anglican Church ran St. George's Indian Residential School from 1901 to 1979. This school was a place of pain where children were kept away from their families, behind chain link fences, and where they were taught to be ashamed of who they were. Because of inadequate funding, the children were often malnourished, and the buildings often poorly built and maintained. At St. George's, in the last years of its existence, a dormitory supervisor preyed upon young boys and sexually abused them. Those boys were born just a few years before me.

The dormitory supervisor was eventually convicted of his crimes. Years later, when a civil case for compensation was being heard, it was determined by a judge that the principal at the time, an Anglican priest by that time deceased, was also involved in the abuse.

So Lytton was quite the place to begin my ministry. I really had no idea what I was walking into. It was 1999 and I was moving from downtown Toronto to this village I had never even visited. The Diocese of Cariboo and the Anglican Church of Canada were being sued by the victims for what was termed, "vicarious liability" and my coworkers at Church House in Toronto darkly joked that I was going from the frying pan into the fire.

Lytton proved to be many things but it was not the fire I thought it would be. As someone who is half First Nations, I think the bishop believed that I would be the person who would go in and redeem the church. In hindsight, sending in someone just because they had First Nations blood wasn't the answer. Sending in someone who was willing to sit and listen was the answer.

The first people who embraced me and taught me the most were the same people who were suing the diocese. They did not equate me, a priest, with the people who had abused them. They saw me as

Catherine. I saw them as Terry, and Ernie, and Maurice. Terry was the one who first taught me how to use a hand drum and how to use my voice in my culture. Ernie was the one who showed me resilience and how he found hope again through the birth of his children. Maurice was the one who showed me the plants and growing things of the area and how to see the bounty of what is around you. Even when it seems that you are in the middle of a dry, parched desert, which Lytton is.

It was about coming together as people, not institutions, with a genuine curiosity and openness to the beauty of the other person.

Let us go back to the Gospel for a moment. “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” There is a grace and dignity in those simple words. A common origin for all Creation and a light that binds us.

If only the Church had focused on this passage when they wrote their Doctrine of Discovery in the 15th century. A Doctrine which gave license to the explorers to consider non-Christians as not fully human and the lands that they inhabited as terra nullius, “empty land”. It was a devastating doctrine that reduced Indigenous people to subhuman and granted authority over them to the Church and political leaders. It has never been rescinded by the Catholic Church and its legacy is still woven through Canadian law. It is why when non-Indigenous people ask Indigenous people to “Get over it”, we can’t. The systems that created the residential schools, the pass control system on reserves, that denied the vote to Indigenous people until 1969, that entangle any attempts to honour the treaties, still exist. The effect of the Doctrine of Discovery exists in laws which govern Indigenous people such as the Indian Act but it also exists in the framework of Canadian politics and law. It is these systems which must be traced back to their roots and removed. These systems of oppression, of denial, of superiority, are not rooted in the Gospel.

How do we even start to do that? There have been many people, both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous, who have called out over the years for Canadians to address the deep-rooted causes of the suffering of Indigenous peoples. I think for a large part a lot of those calls were as effective as yelling into the wind. They tried to catch the nation’s attention, but it didn’t last.

On May 27th this year, the stunning news came that the unmarked graves of 215 children had been found at the former Kamloops Residential School. For Indigenous people, it was not surprising news however it was the realization of fears that communities had held for years. Indigenous families and communities have known for many, many years that their children never came home. In the thousands, children never came home, and families often heard nothing more about their child.

The voices of activists and allies over the years did not raise national sympathy and action. Efforts in the past did not capture the attention of news outlets around the world. What has galvanized advocacy and awareness efforts this time was different. It was a chorus of tiny voices that whispered to the hearts of Canadians - You found us.

We now see these children who died in a place that wanted to erase who they truly were, buried by people who left them with no marker, no memorial, no record of their existence or their death. We

now want to find and remember all these children who died away from their families. We want the truth of their fate to shine out from the darkness that tried to hide them.

How do we live together as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians? Through truth. As painful as truth can be, the darkness that hides hard truths is a rot that weakens society. I believe we can all think back to some ugliness during these past 15 months as we have watched the values of our society reveal themselves in the tragedies of the deaths at long term care homes, the selfishness of some people as they disregarded health measures, and the profiteering of some companies as they hiked prices on essential items. I think we realized that maybe Canadians are not so nice after all.

But what do we do with that truth when we find it? Beat each other over the head with it? Of course not. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission created a list of 94 calls to action. Some have been looked at, some have been ignored. The work of healing our country from old wounds, from old systems of thought that continue to influence is hard work. However, this is the path towards having a healthy society. A society where diversity and inclusion initiatives are not just a different icing on the same old cake but where we go back together and dismantle those patriarchal and racist systems and policies from Canada's beginning which are still underpinning what we perceive to be a modern and just society. It's time to get the skeletons out of the closet. This is what truth is. And we cannot reconcile as people all living in this land until we accept the truth.

So what is our work before us? I believe it is to listen. To begin again our relationships with all manner of diverse peoples. To sit down with people, and to have a genuine curiosity that seeks to discover the depth of the person that you are sitting with. To be simply accepting of the truth of their life without trying to value their message based on the truth of our lives. To realize that until we accept all the infinite ways that the Creator's light shines in others, we are forcing parts of Creation into darkness.

We are standing at the edge of a time of change. I know for many residents of Kingston that the removal of the statue this past week was an emotion filled series of events. I cannot say that that will be the last change. Very likely not. What makes change less painful and less fraught with tension however is for people to have relationships with one another beforehand. To be in dialogue with one another. To understand the hearts and minds of those different from themselves.

I pray that from this place you will go out into the world and kindle your curiosity about others. To let yourself enter into dialogue with your unique light shining for others and that their light will shine in a way that inspires you to seek that light in more people. It is the network of all these small lights shining brightly that will finally shine light on the truth and build a true foundation for meaningful reconciliation for all.