

Simon Gibbons



Simon Gibbons was the first Inuit priest in the Church of England. He was born on June 21, 1851 in Forteau, Labrador – about 13 km north east of the Quebec border. His mother died in childbirth. At five years old Simon was sent by the Anglican Missionary in Forteau to the Church of England Widows and Orphans Asylum (CEWOA) in St. John's, Newfoundland. While there, he showed “intellect of no ordinary degree” and was placed in the Church of England Academy when he was nine.

Two years later, Sophia Mountain, the Lady Superintendent of the orphanage (CEWOA) took Simon under her care. Then, when Simon was 15, she married Edward Field, the Bishop of Newfoundland in 1867. So, in just a few years, Simon went from being an orphan to the Bishop's Court.

Following his graduation from the Academy, Simon began to prepare to take an active part in the ministry of the Church. He became part of a group who trained and worked as Lay Readers, Teachers, and Catechists in Newfoundland's outports. On one occasion during this time, he was leading a Sunday morning Service in the large kitchen of a fisherman's house. It was packed with people, and Simon was standing in the place of honour by the roaring stove. Just as he began the sermon, the lady of the house stood up in her place, by the door, waving her raised hand. “Hold a minute, Parson!” she cried. Simon stopped. The lady continued, “Sal, the puddin'!” Sal, seated on the other side of the stove, arose, took from the dresser the Sunday dumpling in its cloth and popped it into the pot boiling on the stove. “Now go on, Parson” the lady said, prepared to hear the sermon, now that dinner was underway and her mind was at ease.

In 1875, Simon moved to Quebec and served in a similar way in the Diocese of Montreal: teaching in the Church Academy, leading Services as a Lay Reader, and tutoring the Rector's son. Three years later he married Frances, the Rector's daughter. Through it all, the Lord was calling Simon to Holy Orders. And that's where the Maritimes enter this story. In 1876, Simon Gibbons began intensive preparation for ordination at King's College in Windsor, Nova Scotia. He was soon made a Deacon on February 25, 1877 and then a Priest on March 17, 1878.

His first assignment was as travelling missionary in Victoria County, Cape Breton, an area settled by Newfoundland fishermen and their families. He travelled amongst the peoples by horse and sleigh, snowshoe, boat, on foot, and sometimes on his hands and knees, carrying a soldier's knapsack with a change of clothes. His home base was at Baddeck and he routinely ministered to the communities of Englishtown (31 miles away) and Ingonish (56 miles away) by climbing over Smoky Mountain on the Cabot Trail. The following story gives an idea of what was involved:

“In August of 1878 while on his trip North (he was on foot), he came to the foot of Smoky. Being tired, he thought that he would camp for the night as it was fine and warm. After he had something to eat, he made a bed for himself out of spruce boughs and ferns, and with his knapsack for a pillow, he lay down to sleep. Waking early the next morning, he found that his knapsack had gone from under his head. Sitting up, he was astonished to see, about 15 yards away, a small black bear tearing his backpack to pieces. Attracted by the smell of food, he had gently hooked it from under Simon’s head and proceeded to devour the contents.”

In 1885 Simon left Cape Breton for his second parish at Lockeport, Nova Scotia; then, in 1888 he went to Parrsboro where he died on December 14, 1896. During his 18 years of ministry in Nova Scotia, Simon Gibbons initiated and worked with the people to build six church buildings and a mission house -- two churches in Cape Breton; one in Lockeport; and three in the Parrsboro parish. In order to raise money for these projects, Gibbons went twice to Great Britain and once to the West Indies. He preached in Westminster Abbey and met Queen Victoria. He made at least one trip to New York preaching in Trinity Church, New York City – imagine the travelling involved!

In the Fall of 1896, Simon expressed a feeling that his life was coming to an end. “I shall not live much longer,” he said. “Why, Mr. Gibbons,” exclaimed the assistant “you are not old and you are in perfect health”. “Not old for an Englishman,” Gibbons explained, “but we Eskimos do not live to great age. I am now forty-six, which is extremely old for an Eskimo. I do not believe that my changed habits and living conditions will prolong my life expectancy. I shall not live more than a few months longer at most”. And so it was that he died in his sleep not long after.

The Parrsboro parish ran along the Glooscap Trail from just outside of Truro, along the northern shores of Minas Basin, almost to Amherst. One of the Churches built under Gibbons hand, was at Diligent River. Word has it that, in recent years, an inukshuk was raised there in his honour.