

The Right Reverend Geoffrey J. J. Woodcroft
Bishop's Address
to the 118th Session of the Synod of
The Diocese of Rupert's Land
October 14, 2022

I. Greeting & Psalm 121

I greet you in the One who forms and shapes us into his Body, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God we are here, that we showed up, that God through Christ has more to tell us. Thanks be to God that pandemics, estrangements and wars cannot destroy the DNA of Christ. Thanks be to God that we may behold making all things.

In reflecting about what I want to say to you, to say to this Body that I am honoured to serve, I have been thinking on the words of the Psalmist:

*I lift up my eyes to the hills -
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved;
He who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel
Will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper;
The Lord is your shade at your right hand.
The Sun shall not strike you by day,
Nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all evil;
He will keep your life.
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in
From this time on and for evermore.*

Two and a half years waiting to re-join the in-person fellowship of the Body gave each of us opportunity to reflect on who we are as members of Christ's One Holy Catholic Church. We have all raised questions about what is important, what seems less important than we thought before COVID19, and what is apparently new to us. Questions about theology, politics and ministry flooded our thoughts. Our capacity to run with technology seemed to have grown (it seems most folks had a computer or smart phone after all.) In the middle of so many questions, there have been occasions in these last 2 1/2 years that I forgot to look to the hills. I simply forgot that the One body of Christ is the Body that trusts God's response; that remembers together that our help is from the Lord.

We have been waiting 2.5 years for this very moment, to lead and embrace new disciples as we are led and embraced by God. I am praying that as we set out on this new moment, this new chapter, we will each be looking far into the hills for you, O God, where you neither slumber nor sleep; and I pray that God will find His children, your people, waiting affirmation, nourishment and the rich inheritance to be found in the Gospel. *O Lord our keeper, be our shade at your right hand.*

Because the church is parched in the driving sun. It thirsts to live into future days, but it has become uncertain - surrounded by mirages and stumbling with fatigue. Lord, may we trust that the *sun shall not strike any by day, nor the moon by night.*

Shade and keep us as we are overwhelmed with the present realities that face us.

May we trust your shade, enough to cast our eyes wisely upon the hills to again confront dangers and find our way in your Gospel.

II. Resting on Laurels (the challenge)

The Church has not lost two and a half years. In fact the Church may very well have received clarity concerning the physical state of the Anglican Church through this pandemic. "Longing for light, we wait in darkness. Longing for truth, we turn to you" the opening line of Christ Be Our Light, speaks to this very moment. We have literally lived through a hellish experience (in all my privileged life, I never would have thought that I would live through THAT.) Generally the Anglican Church in Canada has had it easy for almost two centuries, though certainly not all its members have had the same ease of access. In many things we got to write our own ticket and script; compared to many other churches we never had to work for our inheritance (the Gospel and truth), we did not have to fight for legitimacy, or fight against prejudice. I think that has made us struggle to own our identity as Christian disciples. Most of us worship in buildings bequeathed to us by Church forbearers, and on land given by the HBC and various governments. Yet we have reached a time when our legacy is running shallow, and our gratitude for, and stewardship of, that legacy has grown thin. We have run out of *rest-upon-your-laurels* time, and now must remember the story that has made us God's Church and Christ's Body. If we have become unsustainable in our present form, let us look to the hills, and long again for the light, because help will most certainly come, and God is most certainly speaking to us.

But the time for resting-on-our-laurels is over, because the world is changing rapidly around us. In the last few decades so much has changed. As we have been worrying about not being able to meet in the buildings that house the Church, or become preoccupied with our own survival as groups, the people in our neighbourhoods have been growing daily more concerned with the world around them. You name it, from Black Lives Matter to Every Child Matters, dismantling anti-black, anti-indigenous racism, to Sacred Circle and the United Nation Declaration of Rights for Indigenous People, people of our neighbourhoods are concerned and talking about it. World leaders are speaking clearly about the most vulnerable people sold into human trafficking (ie. slavery and forced prostitution) and the people of our neighbourhoods are concerned. In January this year Canada joined many nations and the UN in outlawing conversion therapies. The UN leads many nations in challenging those countries who maintain the death penalty for gay and lesbian people. Climate Crisis, the war in Ukraine, and acts of terrorism including North American school shootings are principle foci for people in our neighbourhoods: they are matters of concern for the people, especially young people, living in the hills, or in the cities, in our hospitals and in our schools. And we're all looking for where the help will come from.

The people of our neighbourhoods see our worship houses, they know of God from many sources, and they are parched for a reckoning of all-powerful God in light of all that is frighteningly wrong in the world.

Perhaps 60 years, perhaps a century, the parishes of the present formation of the Diocese of Rupert's Land consciously and subconsciously journeyed in volatile, rapidly changing, automated, and money driven milieu that is North American, western world experiences. It may very well be that this journey, at least in part, has cost God's Church greatly. The cost has included our diminishing capacity to commend the faith that is within us. The cost is no less than our diminishing capacity to understand and to do ALL in our power to support disciples in their life in Christ. The cost is no less than our diminishing capacity to listen to God's guiding voice as fear over-whelms us.

III. Need to Remember Story

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

You and I have no right to stand in front of Jesus and say "How should I know who reached out and touched your robe." that is, knowing what we know. You and I have many an obligation to commend the faith that is in us, to speak of the power of God, and affirm others by seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbour as ourselves.

The Church today is obligated to return to the apostle's teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers so that it can rehearse to the world all that it has learned, knowing from whom we have learned, to draws new disciples, fully into it. It is no mistake that our elders, sponsors and fellow disciples are responsible to carry that spiritual DNA, it is more than a privilege, it is our common identity. It is the duty of each disciple to know the Gospel and to convey the Gospel to those who thirst for the living waters, those hear God's call and need guiding, you for whom the spirit lights.

The sacred writings for Paul and Timothy would certainly be the books of the Hebrew Bible; and thanks to the early apostles and disciples, we have their letters and Gospels as documents that shape and form the Christian Body now. Disciples, Saints in light, have carried the teachings through the resurrected Body, and we have inherited the Gospel, the gift of One who loves us, with the understanding that we must prepare those who shall inherit for all days to come. To whom have you given the Gospel, beloved disciples of Christ?

IV. Need to Offer a Compelling Case

My biggest question for you tonight is this: "What is the case for Christ that compels you? What about Christ brought you here, to this ceremony tonight? What about Christ brings you to worship on Sunday? What about Christ compels you to demonstrate love of your neighbour? What is the case for Christ that compels you?"

I am compelled by a case for Christ that invites me as I am to discipleship. I am compelled by a case for Christ that shows how through sacrifice I make, I share in a vast richness that is God's for the entire world. I am compelled by a case for Christ that illuminates the Church as living and breathing hands ears eyes and feet of Jesus always ready to embrace, heal, collect and send as expressions of his word. I am compelled by a case for Christ that speaks of the very heart of God incarnate, unencumbered by prejudice, greed and ignorance.

A Body of ALL the Baptised, each trusting that the Church is a lively body, doing ALL in its power to support them in discipleship. It is my hope and desire that every member of this Body will be able to offer a unique and compelling case for Christ to all whom they meet. I hope that each disciple can show others the power they have found in the Gospel of Jesus. To that end disciples shall show they who seek, those who thirst for God, that the Body welcomes them; and that they are loved, supported, and all for which they are passionate will be embraced and enhanced.

V. Need to Remember Baptismal Vow

The power of the Gospel, and the strength of the Body of Christ make sense of, and brings resolve to the questions of fairness, equality and safety of ALL people. On the street the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ sheds light for you who are now seeking to make sense beyond oneself of the common and temporal. One 13 year-old, reluctant confirmand, recently spoke of the atrocity that is the war in Ukraine. Their concern was that they are passionately convinced that it represents unchecked evil in the world, and they feel pathetically powerless against the evil. We spoke of the Baptismal Covenant, and the power that is-conveyed by the people's promise to do all in their power to support disciples in their life in Christ. The power intimately links the Gospel with discipleship while intimately linking disciples with one another, making possible the sacrificial commitment with God that disciples make anew each day before one another, and for one another. Disciples are life-long learners adapting (as many, especially our lay and ordained leaders, have illustrated through COVID) in every new situation and time, yet carrying the spiritual DNA of Jesus Christ to those who will next claim what they inherit through the disciples of this age. The power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ challenges unjust structures, where governments have failed, brings healing and relationship to the infirmed and vulnerable where multinational corporations have denied, raped and pushed them aside.

The power of the Gospel shall always be heard through the proclamation of the Body of Christ that the Kingdom of God has come near, it is deep within, and it is for you. We need healing and restoration to wholeness as much as anyone and, counter-intuitively, we experience those blessings most profoundly when we assist others to know them as well. *We learn the Gospel best when we live it in practice.*

So my second question for you tonight is this: Will you continue to do all in your power to support these disciples in Christ? The Church's response to that question is the Body's obligation or abdication for those who follow, and whatever prevents us from doing so must be met head on with theological understanding, giftedness and the knowledge – in that whatever we do must illustrate God's power and love for the world. The Church is they from-whom others will learn, the Church is the story to-be-told, and the compelling case for Christ given for the many who are seeking right now. The Church must reorganize its thinking about how it stewards the resources it has and for whom. There are honourable

and noble truth tellers associated with the Church who have much skill in the shrewd dealings of resources; however, without a reckoning of what discipleship is, and what God does with disciples, it is simply just another business deal. Don't get me wrongly, finding and developing new disciples to whom we bequeath the Gospel today means we will be required to reconsider and redistribute resources to make that happen, it is a responsibility and action of the whole Body.

VI. Conclusion (Bishops' Commitments)

For my time on this rock and in this Body, I am committed to focusing primarily on discipleship and not maintenance of a Church that once was. I am committed to life-long-learning for all disciples. I am committed to making a compelling case for Christ among the nations and encouraging every disciple to make their own unique case. Both the Lambeth Conference and our own General Synod Strategic Plan the Church to claim *Discipleship in Christ* as the primary central focus of the Church around which ministries of Reconciliation, Climate Action, Right Relationships, A Self-determining Indigenous Church, and Human dignity, among many others, may flourish in the light of the Gospel. I hope the Diocese of Rupert's Land may embrace that leading as we intentionally lead in our neighborhoods. May God's seeking children see in the light we shine and be welcomed in our gratitude, some going as their faith has made them well, and some called through us to follow the One through who has called and taught us.

Remember what you have been taught, and who taught that to you! Now is the time to an instrument of teaching, enabling disciples to answer the call "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support disciples in their life in Christ?" with assurance, a well-articulated case for Christ, and a passion to be Christ's eyes, ears, hands and feet in the world. Now is the right time to own our identity, the Body of Christ, and the disciples thereof.

Now is the time to remember the story we inherited and the commitment we made in Christ's life, death and resurrection.

Amen.