



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens

Proper 6 Year C February 13, 2022

Episcopal Visit to All Saints', Burnaby

It is great to be with you here at All Saints, Burnaby. It's been a long time since I have been in this church. It is a beautiful building. Thank you to all of you for your hard work in ministry over many years but in particular for these last two years of living in a pandemic. This has been such a difficult time for all of us trying to live out our faith but not able to be in community in the ways that we would like to. I am so grateful as well to your rector, Justin, for the work that he has done in this pandemic period. For the work of pivoting and shifting and rethinking things on a regular basis. I am also very grateful for all of his work and involvement in the diocese beyond this parish, and your willingness to share him beyond this parish. I am grateful as well for the ministries of Leah and Gordon which extend far beyond the four walls of this church. All of this is much appreciated and important. Thank you to all of you, it is good to be with you.

These are, to say the least, complicated, and difficult times. Just last weekend we had protests and counter-protests in Greater Vancouver and in several other cities across the country. These of course have continued where some are claiming to be demonstrating for freedom, others alarmed by misinformation and misrepresentation. In Vancouver, trucks were blocked by bikes and pedestrians, lots of jeering and name calling erupted. There were signs and placards and flags held up on both sides. Horribly so, in parts of the country some of what was held up showed images and icons of hate and violence and racism and supremacy. It was sad to see. It seems like anger is starting to boil over as this pandemic continues; for all of us want to see an end to it and an opportunity to get back to our lives of more than two years ago. We have all had enough of protocols and living in fear and worrying about our elders and our children and the immunocompromised. Can't we just bring an end to all of this? Can't we just get back to our lives the way that they were? ...Well what are the lives that we want to get back to? What I mean is what do you think that God is calling us to be and do because of our faith and trust in

God's presence in our lives? What have we learned from this pandemic? Only that we need to protest for more freedoms and less concern about the most vulnerable of our society? Less concern for those who have risked their lives and their own health in many different roles in our country but especially in health care? Less concern for the forgotten and the ignored in our society? What do you think that God is calling us to be?

There are many potential answers to that question, but I sat with it for quite a while this past week. What do you think that God is calling us to be? With all that is going on perhaps we lose sight of what God hopes for us.

That last line of the gospel, if you remember it, was not a lot of help in this it seems to me. It did not bring clarity to this question, but it sure had a bit of zing to it. It was purposeful, disturbing, and perhaps even off-putting. It makes you wonder if being in the Jesus following occupation is really the kind of work you want to put on your business card.

Hear them again: "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets." Woe to you when all speak well of you... I thought that was what we were supposed to do, we Christians in particular. I thought we were supposed to be loving and as such have compassion and caring ooze out of our pores so that we stand out in the world. They will know that we are Christians by our love, we are told. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, we are told. Be nice to other people and they will be nice to you, and I guess the next step is that all will speak well of you.

But this Jesus says something a little different. It is not quite so simple. In fact, now I am adlibbing a little so forgive me, in fact loving your neighbour is not as straightforward as just being nice to everyone. Sometimes in fact believing in a God of love, the God who calls us into service as a Good Samaritan or a forgiving parent or a seeker of the kingdom of heaven is not so straightforward and simple as being nice. It goes much further and deeper. It is about a whole new vision of our lives and this world. A whole new vision and understanding that the grace of God that is showered on our lives is meant for all people and not just a certain few. That we are called to embody this grace, this forgiveness, this new hope of how this world might look when we focus on the Kingdom of God that Jesus had in mind. Perhaps this pandemic has taught us that instead of protesting a lack of freedom we are called to understand more deeply our connection with every other human being.

Jesus had this strange impression that having faith in a God who calls us beloved changes us to rethink how things are done. It changes how we look at other people. It causes us to wonder at how we spend our money, our time, our talents. It pushes us to respect the dignity of every human being and not simply be nice to them. It urges us to explore how we strive for justice and peace in this world. It knocks down traditions that do not build up and asks how we can safeguard this creation and the created order in the world.

'In the gospel for this day, it was phrased in this way, and hang on because they are not meant to be comforting words but challenging and buckle up your seat-belt kind of words despite our

best efforts to tame them, or think they are meant for someone else. But no, they are meant for us:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of God.”

Now in terms of inviting people to join with us on the Christian Pilgrimage these are probably the worst words you could ever find. They are argumentative, make no sense in terms of what many people in this world see as blessed. But that was, of course, Jesus’ point.

Faith in a God of love is not just filled with lovely moments but in fact stirs us to see that not everyone is loved in this world. Not everyone is welcomed in this world. Not everyone is filled with hope and keen purpose. And so, Jesus reminded us of who God sees as blessed.

The poor; the forgotten, the ignored, the addicted, the ugly, the diseased, the refugee, the foreigner, the one of different racial background from the majority, the one of different orientation; blessed are you for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

The hungry; the desperate, the ones with nowhere to turn, the ones who hunger for peace, the ones who just lost their job, the ones caught in the middle of a war they want nothing to do with, the suicidal, the depressed, the lonely, the starving for food... or kindness. Blessed are you for you will be filled.

The weeping: the sad, the grieving, those living with loss (of spouse or child or dreams or health), those who feel an overwhelming hopelessness, the ones who feel that our world has gotten it all wrong, those who can’t help but cry at the misfortune of others. Blessed are you for you will laugh.

This is the crazy world into which we have been adopted, we Christians, we followers of Christ, we, who have the waters of Baptism splashed upon us. A world where we start to take on the eyewear that Jesus used and see that so much of the world is turned upside down and needs to be turned God-side up; so that we start to recognize things as Christ did, we start to notice as the Spirit nudges us, we start to pray as God hopes that we might pray; that we are called not to be part of the problem of only wanting things to be nice but to be part of the solution where love of neighbour is a challenge and we are part of blessing them. That’s right, we are the ones called to be blessing others, or at least with the Holy Spirit working through us. This is what God is calling us to be: by our Baptism we are the hands and feet of Christ, we are given new eyes with which to see the world. Called not just to be nice or popular but infused with a new vision of how this world should be.

Blessed are you... Jesus said. May it be so. May it be so.