



Sermon by the Right Rev'd John R. Stephens

All Saints Day

November 7, 2021

Christ Church, Hope

I am so delighted to be with you here at Christ Church Hope, especially as we celebrate the 160th anniversary of the parish. This gives me so much joy. As many of you might know, I have been the Bishop of the Diocese of New Westminster for about 8 months. And quite honestly, soon after I was installed as the bishop my hope was to visit in particular the parishes furthest away from the Synod Office as soon as possible. Christ Church Hope was very high on my list, and I am so happy to be with you, especially on this day. I have known your vicar, Tim, for a few years on and off and I know that he has been doing great work as your priest and pastor in this parish and in the wider community. I know that all of you have given of your gifts and talents and financial support to build up this congregation and your own faith and dedication to the gospel of Christ. Thank you.

I discovered that in July 1861 construction of Christ Church began and it was consecrated by Bishop George Hills on November 8 of that same year. I just want you to think about that with me for a bit. I don't know about you but building a church in about 4 months seems quite outstanding. I know that the church was built by the Royal Engineers

but even so. Equally impressive is that this is the oldest church on the mainland of British Columbia and the oldest church in the province still resting on its original foundation. A sure foundation indeed. The Reverend Alexander David Pringle was the first rector, originally a missionary from Scotland. The town of Hope has changed in a huge number of ways over the years, but Christ Church has remained central and obvious as part of the fabric and foundation of this community.

I want you to consider with me for a moment about the vision those first Anglicans in Hope had 160 years ago. A vision to build a church that would stand and speak to faith in God. But it does beg the question, as they considered, designed, and then built this church, what did they see as the purpose of what they envisioned? Just a building that reminded those first folk of many of the churches back home in Europe or more particularly in England or Scotland? Was it just about imitating what was seen at home in a far away land? Or was it much more than that? I trust that their vision involved more than imitation and hope that you agree with me, for this building really centred on what is most important in life and what each one of us sees as at the core, the heart, of life. Sure the first people of Hope wanted to spread the gospel to those seeking a fortune in the gold rush or the Indigenous people of this area or to those newly arrived hoping to begin life anew... but again it must have been more than that; and more of a response to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to recognize the presence of God in this place, the love of God right here, in their hearts and in their souls and they knew, they simply knew that they needed to something about it; to acknowledge that God was inviting them to claim a deep faith in God's abiding and transforming presence. And that vision continues.

Today we are celebrating All Saints Day and it is the perfect celebration in our Church's calendar to have on a church's anniversary. For we remember the saints, and by saints I certainly do not mean people who are now found in dusty history books of the Church or those who were perfect or who always did the right thing, but real people who wrestled with what it means to be a person of faith. Real people who were saints and part of this congregation and who were shaped by their trust in the love and blessing of God. Real people just like all of us who have come to church today to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit of God continues to move amongst us and continues to change us and call us into the fullness of life.

But there can be times when it can be hard to trust in this. Our world is a complicated and anxious place to be. There are many concerns facing us right at this moment, I am sure that I do not have to tell you. We continue to live in a pandemic, and it has deeply affected us. We have been separated from one another, we have worried about getting sick, or worse, from this virus and also about spreading it to others. But there are other things as well that continue to concern us and trouble us: the state of the world of today and climate change and moving very slowly to respond to it despite the COP26 meetings going on right now... homelessness in the entire country but especially here in this area, drug overdoses, the effects of residential schools, racism, distrust of strangers, violence against women, and many others that I do not need to tell you about. But we have gathered here in this place to say something different, to gather and affirm our trust in something greater, to gather and recognize that we believe in the grace and mercy of God.

The Gospel reading for this day speaks to this and is a beautiful passage to ponder on this anniversary and this All Saints Day. It is one of my favourite parts of John's gospel as it is filled with drama, intrigue and an invitation to live more deeply in this world. We heard about Jesus coming to Mary and Martha after their brother Lazarus had died. There are many subplots to this passage, but I draw your attention to Jesus' words to the crowd upon Lazarus's appearance out of the tomb, he said, "Unbind him and let him go." Unbind him and let him go, it seems to me are great words describing the Christian faith. Our calling is to be people who unbind and set free. We are called to help ourselves and others be unbound from past mistakes, from errors of judgment, from discrimination, from hatred and violence, from those things that belittle and cause us to feel less than human. Unbind them and let them go. Feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned. Unbind them and let them go. Consider how we treat this planet, how we respond to current catastrophes, how we see our neighbour. How we must move from an individualistic mindset to one of community, where we have compassion beyond narrow boundaries. For our role is to live this love of God that we hold so dear. Live it in this world.

And as I thought about it those first people who formed Christ Church Hope so many years ago must have had this in mind as well. But there have been many saints throughout the years who have called us to this as well. People who are so good at unbinding others. People that draw your eye away from centring upon yourself to unbinding yourself and seeing God calling you toward a depth of compassion and new vision.

Catherine of Sienna, St. Catherine of Sienna, who lived in the 14th Century, once said: "It is surely justice to share our natural gifts with those who share our nature." She also said: "Speak the truth in a million voices. It is silence that kills."

Saint Oscar Romero once said: "A church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a gospel that does not unsettle, proclaim a word of God that does not get under anyone's skin or a word of God that does not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what kind of gospel is that?"

Desmond Tutu, while not a saint in the official sense of that word but a saint none-the-less, once said this: "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." He also said: "Hate has no place in the house of God. No one should be excluded from our love, our compassion or our concern because of race or gender, faith or ethnicity - or because of their sexual orientation. Nor should anyone be excluded from health care on any of these grounds. In my country of South Africa, we struggled for years against the evil system of apartheid that divided human beings, children of the same God, by racial classification and then denied many of them fundamental human rights. We knew this was wrong. Thankfully, the world supported us in our struggle for freedom and dignity."

Another voice, while also not an official saint, seems to have a light shining through her words, Joan Chittister, once said: "Humanity is about identifying with somebody else's pain, with being there." She also wrote: "A spirituality of work is based on a heightened sense of sacramentality, of the idea that everything that is, is holy and that our hands consecrate it to the service of God. When we grow radishes in a small container in a city

apartment, we participate in creation. We sustain the globe. When we sweep the street in front of a house in the dirtiest city in the country, we bring new order to the universe. We tidy the Garden of Eden. We make God's world new again. When we repair what has been broken or paint what is old or give away what we have earned that is above and beyond our own sustenance, we stoop down and scoop up the earth and breathe into it new life again, as God did one morning in time only to watch it unfold and unfold and unfold through the ages."

Meister Eckhart, once said, "You may call God love, you may call God goodness. But the best name for God is compassion."

The question for Christ Church Hope now is, what is God calling us to do as we look to the next 160 years? We are called to live this gospel which is life transforming. One that knows the love of God and lives it each and every day. Lives it so that forgiveness is known, compassion is lived, the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given something to drink, the lonely are visited, Christ is known by our actions, our prayers, our teachings, by how we live out this gospel to which the Reverend Alexander David Pringle was first called, and it has never changed. So, my word to you today is to continue to be saints in this world for God knows we need more saints.