



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R Stephens
St. Agnes Day
Episcopal Visit to St. Agnes, North Vancouver
January 23, 2022

I am so delighted to be with you here at St. Agnes this morning. I am sorry that we continue to be burdened with the restrictions of this pandemic but glad that we can still find ways to gather in-person or online or even both. I am grateful for the good work and ministry that has taken place here over many years but in particular over the last two years. This has been a difficult time for all parishes, and I know that having to pivot and change has felt overwhelming at times. I am grateful for the ministry of your Rector, Stephen for his pastoral ministry as well as his good leadership, teaching and many skills. I am also so grateful for his ministry as an archdeacon, he works extremely hard for this entire archdeaconry and the diocese as a whole. I appreciate that this parish shares him so readily. I am also grateful for the ministry of Deacon Liz Lindsay; I know that her work over the years has reached far beyond the boundaries of the parish. I am grateful to all of you for the ministry of this place. It is great to be with you.

Wow! Well, that was a rather strong and even jarring gospel passage for this morning, wasn't it? It was not one of those gentle and pastoral passages of a good Samaritan or the golden rule or the search for a pearl of great value. This was different from all of that. "Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you.... Brother will betray brother, and a father his child, children will rise against parents ... you will be hated by all because of my name." None of these phrases would be great for a cross-stitching project to hang on your wall or to write in a get-well card. This is something quite different. This is about divisions and rejection,

discrimination and intolerance. In the midst of pandemic this does not feel to be good news. This sounds perhaps a bit like the opposite.

This past week until this coming Tuesday is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. A week set aside, and to state the obvious, to pray for the unity of the Christian Church. A week to contemplate who we are as a Church, as Anglicans and how this connects with who we are as part of the worldwide or *Catholic* Church. For the Body of Christ is incredibly divided. There are so many different denominations it is hard to count them all, or even know them all. And there is animosity between us, it is sad to say, but we do not see eye to eye on all things and this continues to be problematic and to be honest embarrassing. And so we need this time to pray for unity, not necessarily uniformity but unity; how we can be together and work together and pray together. And when we hear the passage from the gospel of Matthew this morning, perhaps it feels like maybe all this division is just the way it is supposed to be. There will be division, there will be distrust, there will be unease in how we walk with one another. But surely that cannot be the last word, surely there is more expected from us as Christians, the Body of Christ in the world of this time and this place. Let me come back to this.

The reason that we heard this passage from Matthew's gospel this morning is not to offer a comment on the week of prayer for Christian Unity but because this morning we are remembering the patron saint of this parish, Agnes. For she certainly came to know much about the images portrayed in the gospel. I am sure that many of you know something about Agnes but just to remind you, she was martyred in Rome in the year 304. She was just twelve years old and was arrested for being a Christian. She was urged and encouraged to renounce her faith in Jesus Christ, but she refused and remained completely steadfast in her faith. At just twelve years old, it is said that an attempt was made to burn her at the stake and that did not work and so she was beheaded. Horrible to even imagine and I apologize for even describing it for you. But that is what we know about her. She is seen as the patron saint of young women, newly married couples and those who have suffered sexual abuse. She knew well the calamities listed in the Matthew's gospel.

What was it, do you think that she had discovered in her life so that she knew that she could not step away from her faith in Christ? What was it in her soul, her heart, her mind so that she knew and clearly without wavering that she must stand firm and there were no other options? It is hard to say for certain but clearly, she discovered what we describe in shorthand as the gospel. She discovered the love, the grace, the peace of God. She discovered the good news and words of forgiveness, hope and blessing. She knew that she was beloved of God and that shaped and formed who she was how she lived. This is incredibly inspiring.

And there have been others as well who have discovered the nearness of the Divine in their lives. That the Holy Spirit was calling them into new possibilities; inviting them not to sit on the sidelines but to participate in the coming of God's kingdom in this world.

This past Monday in many parts of the world but particularly in the United States, the life of the martyr and preacher Dr. Martin Luther King Junior was remembered. He too was one who

knew the darkness that Jesus spoke about in the gospel, for he was killed for his beliefs in a larger and more robust understanding of God's grace and blessing. He too knew the pain and horror of this despite his own preaching that we live out the love of God in each moment of our precious lives. To take seriously our faith as a response to God's words of calling us beloved.

Martin Luther King Junior once said (and I apologize in advance for non-inclusive language when referring to God, but these are the words he used): "So I say to you, seek God and discover Him and make Him a power in your life. Without Him all of our efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into darkest nights. Without Him, life is a meaningless drama with the decisive scenes missing. But with Him we rise from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope. With Him we rise from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy. St. Augustine was right – we were made for God, and we will be restless until we find rest in Him.

"Love yourself if that means rational, healthy, and moral self-interest. You are commanded to do that. That is the length of life. Love your neighbour as you love yourself. You are commanded to do that. That is the breadth of life. But never forget that there is a first and even greater commandment, 'Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy mind.' This is the height of life. And when you do this, you live the complete life."¹

Today is the one-year anniversary of my consecration or ordination as a Bishop. It has been quite a year I must say. So far, my entire ministry as a bishop has been during a pandemic. Not highly recommended. But it has been a wonderful time of getting to know the beautiful diversity of our diocese. I am grateful to so many people for kindness, support, and prayers. As I look back, I think of that service of consecration at the cathedral where we were limited to ten people in attendance, but hundreds joined through the livestream. We could not physically be together but somehow we could pray together and know a sense of community despite geographic separation.

And when I reflect on that day I think about the promises and commitments I made. Many were made at the cathedral that day which I hold dear to my heart and soul. But I also reflected that most central to the role of a bishop is the same for all of us who are gathered here this morning and it is what we commit to and promise to do by our baptism. Just to remind you, we commit to continuing in the apostles' teaching and fellowship and the breaking of bread and the prayers. To persevere in resisting evil. To proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ. To seek and serve Christ in all persons loving our neighbour as ourselves. To strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. To strive to safeguard the integrity of God's creation, and respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth. That is what we are asked to do, and it is the calling of all of us to live that out. That has shaped my life for as long as I can remember and has shaped my life as a bishop.

¹ From *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Selected by Coretta Scott King 1983 Page 64

I said earlier that I would come back to the topic of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. There are so many divisions in our beloved Church that it is painful and sad. But our calling is to stay focussed on the commitments made at our baptism. We must not lose sight of that. These promises need to be welded into our minds, glued to our hearts, transcribed into our souls. If we stay focused upon them these divisions amongst us would look very different. Oh, we would continue to have things that would divide us, but we might just recognize with peace and confidence that God is not calling us to uniformity but to unity, that place where with respect and purpose where we love one another and live out God's love in our lives and in the world. The world around us needs us to live this out.

I think that Agnes and Martin Luther King Junior and many others discovered this. That we have a higher calling to respect the dignity of every human being, to seek and serve Christ in all persons and let these Baptismal words wash over us and change us, transform us, remake us. So that the divisions that Jesus spoke about in the gospel are not seen as inevitable but as what happens when we lose sight to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

May God continue to guide us toward unity and living the gospel of life.