



Sermon by the Right Rev'd John R. Stephens

October 3, 2021 St. Philip's Vancouver

Feast of St. Francis

It is good to be with you here at St. Philip's. It has been a little while since I have stepped into this pulpit and seen your bright shining faces. It is good to be back. It is great to be here. Perhaps this congregation more than any other might be quite shocked to see me return with a mitre and a crozier as the Diocesan Bishop. As many of you know I have a long connection with this parish and many memories connected to this place. I went to Sunday School here. Pat Robertson, may she rest in peace, one of my former Sunday School teachers who was rightly shocked to see me as the Rector here, I wonder what she would say today. I think I can imagine. And of course, there are many others over many years who were part of moulding and shaping me. Lots of beautiful memories of this wonderful church community. One that continues to grow and change and develop and evolve as it should and will do. This is so great to see.

Part of that new life that is emerging for St. Philip's is to see the Reverend Lorne Manweiler here as your soon to be installed rector. What a delight it is to be able to officially welcome him today. He will be a wonderful pastor, teacher, preacher and priest for all of you. I know that you are very keen to get to know him and he you. I am sorry if my arriving today affects some of that. But in a different way it is wonderful for me to be part of the beginning of this new relationship and ministry. Welcome to Lorne, I am very pleased to have you here. I have enjoyed getting to know you already.

Also, I am so grateful to the Reverend Philippa Segrave Pride. What an amazing job she did as your interim priest. She has such an array of talent and ability, a great priest. And her sense of humour, well, one just has to stay on one's toes with her. Such a delight.

So here we are on this St. Francis Day with a gospel reading that offers us a challenge and an opportunity to rethink what God is calling us to be and do. And this is important to take to heart.

The gospel passage contained these comfortable words that many have heard before but somehow seem to strike a chord, perhaps even more so as we remain in pandemic times: Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart and, and you will find rest for your souls.” These are words worthy of cross-stitching, of placing on a bumper sticker, of being wrapped around our heart and soul. Words worth treasuring and weighing out and allowing to pour through our fingers and hearts and souls. Those final words really struck me, let me repeat them for they are not to be lost in the complications of this life: you will find rest for our souls. I have met many people lately who are searching to find rest for their souls. The pandemic has them weary. Not weary in the more ordinary sense of that but weary in that their souls are tired. Tired of separation, tired of worrying about their own health and the health of others. Tired of protocols and doing the right thing. Tired and not quite sure what God is asking of them. Tired of not knowing what the future is going to hold. Tired of all this and possibly more. Waiting and quietly hoping for God to surprise them with a comfort and a lifting of the burdens so that there is a sense of freedom and new faith. And then these words pop up for us this morning. Come to me all you that are weary... you will find rest for your souls. We need this. To let these words, drape over our shoulders and wrap around us. I am not really one for catch phrases that are simply warm and fuzzy, but I don’t see these words as simply that. They are words of life.

They are words that touch us at the core and centre of who we are. In all the searching and wondering about how God might act, what God is all about, how God is with us in a pandemic, how we can know that God is near, that God is amongst us, Jesus gently says, “Come to me all you that are weary... you will find rest for your souls.” All the angst of the past 19 months, all the wonderings about how we can worship God when we cannot gather, all the frustrations about distancing and then these words. They are that balm that we need when many other things seemed to have failed. A comfort in the knowledge that God is with us, God is amongst us, God is still known to us. And God is not angry and waiting to destroy us but is offering what we desire more than anything else, rest for our souls.

Today we are remembering and acknowledging St. Francis. One who suddenly discovered what those words of rest for our souls really meant. And it affected him deeply. So deeply and profoundly that he could not simply carry on with the way that he was. He needed to be transformed and changed by this gospel message. And so, he gave up so much of his former life and instead sought out the poor, sought out creatures in this world, sought out new purpose and meaning. He left everything to follow Christ: money, possessions, fame, fortune, family, prestige, plans, the expected lifestyle, the anticipated position in society. All of it. The things that got in the way.

Many people know a few things about Francis, like the prayer attributed to him, “Make me a channel of your peace...” Others might note that Pope Francis has adopted his name and dare I say a portion of his ministry. And this has deeply affected Christians all around the world. Pope Francis has not shied away from issues related to concern for the

plight of those who live in poverty and those whose lives are deeply affected by climate change... namely all of us.

St. Francis is connected to all of this. But he also offered some beautiful theology in some small, pithy statements that really are, like the gospel passage of today, very much worth spending time with and pondering how they might affect us and transform us. Beautiful words that also might be great in a cross-stitch pattern or on a community billboard or that place within us that might just offer some rest for our souls. For he said:

Lord, help me to live this day, quietly, easily. To lean upon Thy great strength, trustfully, restfully. To wait for the unfolding of Thy will, patiently, serenely. To meet others, peacefully, joyously. To face tomorrow, confidently, courageously.

He said, The deeds you do may be the only sermon some persons will hear today.

All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle.

Ask the beasts and they will teach you the beauty of this earth.

If you have (people) who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have (people) who will deal likewise with their fellow (people).

We should seek not so much to pray but to become prayer.

And in some ways, I could just conclude this sermon there. Hard to argue with St. Francis, the pope and of course Jesus words to the heavy burdened. But what are we supposed to do with all this? How do we respond?

Just Recently Pope Francis, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew made a joint declaration about climate emergency and climate change and climate injustice. They said, 'We stand before a harsh justice: biodiversity loss, environmental degradation and climate change are the inevitable consequences of our actions, since we have greedily consumed more of the earth's resources than the planet can endure. But we also face a profound injustice: the people bearing the most catastrophic consequences of these abuses are the poorest on the planet and have been the least responsible for causing them.'

Here in Canada, there are also issues that have caused us to wonder about humanity and the errors we continue to make, how we seem to get it so wrong in how we can live with a compassion for one another. Last Thursday was Truth and Reconciliation Day in Canada. A day that highlighted so much of what was discovered this past year, the unmarked burial sites on the grounds of residential schools. The discovery has reawakened deep divides and concerns about racism, colonialism, injustice, blind ignorance, failing to respect the dignity of every human being. Surely, we are called to more and to better. Surely, we, who have discovered rest for our souls must be deeply affected to see that we need to bring hope and truth and reconciliation in how we walk on this planet.

And so, hear Jesus words again: "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart and, and you will find rest for your souls." As I have said already, let these words wash over you, drape all over you, influence you. Like St. Francis let them transform and change you so that you can never be the same. For we are called to be bearers of inviting rest for the soul not just for ourselves but for all people. May it be so and may our prayers not just be words that remain stuck on a page but actions that bring hope to all the burdened of this world.