



Sermon by the Right Rev'd John R. Stephens

St. Catherine's Day, St. Laurence Coquitlam November 21, 2021

It is good to be with you at St. Laurence this morning, I am grateful to be able to share in this time of worship and reflection with all of you this morning. I recognize that this morning the emphasis is on St. Catherine's and the coming together of two communities and looking to the future and God's calling to new possibilities. It is great to be with all of you.

I am very grateful to your rector, Eric, for ensuring that I am here this morning. I am grateful to Eric for the wonderful priest and pastor that he is and his dedication and commitment to this parish and to the Diocese as a whole. I am grateful for his ministry and the care with which he has welcomed St. Catherine's bringing us to this day and this time to acknowledge a wonderful history and pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we consider where God is leading. I am grateful to Archdeacon Leggett for his involvement, guidance and leadership in this process and for being here today as well. I am also very appreciative of the work that Deacon Pat has done and continues to do. ...Today, we will acknowledge too that there is some grief as we consider what might have been and the many people who were part of the worshipping community of St. Catherine's over the years and now, as we have moved through this time of transition. We will acknowledge as well that this is not easy but clearly has become mandatory to seek new direction. We will be thinking and praying about all of this.

And for this we will be celebrating the feast day of St. Catherine of Alexandria. Now I have to confess the truth here, I have heard the name of St. Catherine of Alexandria for many many years. But when I started to dig into some of the history of this beloved saint, a beloved saint particularly in the orthodox tradition, I found rather sparse details. And to be

honest I really like this. Too often there are too many details about the recognized saints of our Christian history and often those details have been tweaked and rewritten so that they appear a little different from what the saint's siblings might have described. That's all part of it as traditions and folklore grow, but when there are rather scant details it suggests that in many ways this was more a regular person with a devout faith. A person not unlike any of us who want to deepen our own faith, grow in our trust of God, strengthen our doubts, follow the way of Christ in this time in the history of this planet. A person not far removed from who we are but one who might share our own description of the pilgrimage of faith. This is helpful it seems to me, the communion of saints seem closer and nearer.

So here is what I found out about St. Catherine of Alexandria, and I am sure that some of you will know some of this already. She was born in about 287 in Alexandria, Egypt. Around about the age of fourteen, she experienced a vision of Mary and the infant Jesus, and became a Christian. When she witnessed the persecution of Christians she went to the emperor Maxentius to urge him to bring a stop to it. The story goes that rather than execute her, the emperor ordered a debate and she took on fifty orators and clearly was the winner of the debate for many in the audience converted to Christianity.

Catherine was then arrested and scourged. Despite the torture, she did not abandon her faith. Word of her arrest and the power of her faith quickly spread and over 200 people visited her. There is a story as well about the Holy Spirit coming to visit her and a sign of this is in the dove that now sits above the font here at St. Laurence. Eventually Catherine was beheaded but many stories continued to circulate about her healing power, her gift of speaking the truth of the Holy Spirit and her willingness to stand up for her faith, even to the point of death.¹

So that's a little bit about this teenage saint. But as I said what inspired me was the simplicity of the story. It was her pursuit of justice, her pursuit of compassion, her pursuit of discovery to know more about what it means to live out one's faith, her determination to listen for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. With so few details of who she was or what she was like, she does not seem far removed from any of us gathered here today, but she does cause us to wonder, would we have done the same to stand up against oppression when it might be easier to stay on the sidelines. Would we have questioned those in power even if we knew it would put us in danger?

In the passage from the gospel of Matthew that we heard just a few moments ago we heard these words: "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven." I sat with those words for a while this week. What does it mean to acknowledge Christ do you think? Simply tip your cap to him or bow to him or recognize him or simply know his name... or does it involve much more? Does it mean being a martyr in his name or does it seek to live into his parables of good Samaritan, prodigal child, mustard seed or workers in the vineyard? Does acknowledging him refer only to memorizing some of his words or is it more about allowing those words to sink in and disturb us; to allow his words to change us and form us; to allow his words to cause us to see anew the world as God sees the world and that indeed blessed are the peacemakers and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness?

¹ [St. Catherine of Alexandria - Saints & Angels - Catholic Online](https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=341)
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One of the other Bible passages linked with St. Catherine of Alexandria was from the book of Revelation. It is a passage often read at funerals as it puts death in a new light, certainly after the discovery of the empty tomb of Easter. For we heard these words: "See I am making all things new." These are words, it seems to me that are related to acknowledging Christ. For our faith is about making all things new. And more to the point our faith changes our lives and changes our eyesight so that we recognize God in our midst, so that we see Christ among us, so that we discover that the Holy Spirit is still coming to us with new wind and new fire. But this does not mean that we simply sit back and observe; our faith, like Catherine's invites us to be part of making all things new. Our faith changes us and our world needs us to live into our response.

This past week was filled with rain and flooding and landslides and road closures and people losing their homes and belongings amongst many other things related to record rainfall. Our prayers continue to go out to all those affected and continue to be trying to live with the consequences, and also for those first responders. Our west coast has been inundated with strange weather phenomena and unpredictable heat, wind, fire and flood. We are aware as to why this is happening, the climate is changing due to human activity. We know this and yet we are unsure of how to respond. COP26 was intended to bring about a strong and clear response but that was not really the result. How do we now live out our baptismal promise to care for this world and all its inhabitants? See I am making all things new, God invites us.

I know that in this parish you have been exploring more about relationships with our Indigenous sisters and brothers. About residential schools, about the doctrine of discovery, about continuing issues of racism, about colonialism. I know you also discussed reconciliation and that this is not simply a new catchphrase but involves a commitment to how we live. It is an invitation to rethink how we walk in this world. See I am making all things new, God invites us.

The world around us is changing. People are curious about spirituality, most have a strong belief in God but many are not sure what to do with this. Connecting with a church seems daunting or intimidating. Curiosity about how to recognize the science of today and linking that with a belief in God's grace and goodness seems a challenge for some. What is faith really all about? Memorizing certain texts or is it living into a love of God and neighbour and self? Many folks are not sure where to turn and a number of churches are feeling this. The parish of St. Catherine's is no exception to this but clearly they have determined a new way to move forward, a new way to be the Church in this place and this time. A new way that acknowledges an amazing history of St. Catherine's but also that a new chapter is beginning. A new way which involves building new bridges with new possibilities that move forward from what was. See I am making all things new, God invites us

And this has always been and will always be the way of the Church in the world. We are constantly called to pay attention to the world around us and recognize God in the midst of it and inviting us forward. Calling us to reinvent ourselves for this time and this place and this circumstance and this setting. Acknowledging Christ, following Christ, giving our life to Christ's purposes is not a straight path of simplicity and straight lines. No faith is all about a pilgrimage that meanders, wanders, strengthens and weakens, grows and shrinks. Faith is coming to see that throughout history and time God has continued to whisper and shout, to nudge and to remind: See I am making all things new, over and over

again. See I am making all things new, God invites us. Catherine, St. Catherine of Alexandria heard this invitation and responded with a determined faith that could not be shaken. An invitation that has continued to echo throughout time. And it is an invitation centred on death and resurrection, new life and new meaning, peace and justice, grace and love for now and for eternity. An invitation to the parish of St. Catherine's and to each one of us on this day and forever. Come and see, God says, I am making all things new.