

Dreams, Visions and Blessings

A Michaelmas Sermon for the Induction of the Reverend Ken Vinal as Rector
St. Stephen's Anglican Church West Vancouver
September 28, 2021.

Thanks, Ken, for your invitation to preach this afternoon: in the calendar of the church year today we're observing Michaelmas, the feast of St. Michael and All Angels—so we're deep in the imaginative landscape of the Judeo-Christian world. It's a world filled with dreams and visions where there's a direct connection between the spiritual and the physical. It's a most appropriate day for an induction, as new beginnings are always filled with dreams and visions; it's a perfect time to contemplate the connection between earth and heaven.

Let's deal with the angels right off: angels occupy key roles in symbolic stories of cultures around the world. Their purpose is always to bring messages to human beings from God. This is what's going on in the reading from Genesis: Jacob, using a rock as a pillow, falls asleep under the stars and has a dream where he sees a ladder connecting earth and heaven with angels ascending and descending. This is Biblical code for getting a divine message: Jacob dreams that he sees God standing beside him, speaking to him: and God gives him a message. God blesses Jacob and the message given is this: that just as Jacob has been blessed, all the families of the earth will be blessed through him and his family: this is the key. God blesses Jacob—and God blesses us so that others might be blessed also—this is the message that his dream brings—pass on the blessings.

Passing on a blessing is a great theme in the Old and New Testaments—and it's an important theme to be sounded at this induction because it's a key message for the life of a parish church. Our parishes are places where blessings are given in baptism, eucharist, marriage, burials. When we receive a blessing it's our obligation and joy to pass it on because God's grace is always in motion, it's never static. The temptation is to hoard our blessings—to keep them to ourselves as if we have in some way earned or deserved them. But when we pass on the blessings to others, we become like angels ourselves, sharing the messages of love and hope that have blessed us. So think about a moment when you have experienced a blessing from God—and then think about how you could pass that on. It can be as simple as a phone call or a visit with a friend who is grieving or ill or suffering. It can be the simple act of praying for others, it can be holding space in your homes for those from whom you have been estranged. It can be as powerful as a generous philanthropic gift or as gentle as a walk with a friend. Whenever we practice kindness and pass on our blessings, we are angels--messengers of divine love.

For well over 100 years St Stephens has been a place where God's blessings have been celebrated: this is the mother church of West Vancouver, a spiritual home for many and a place deeply enriched by great leadership. As Jonathan's incumbency was ending, this congregation bravely took first steps towards redevelopment of this site: it's potentially a big change for this parish. Today I'd like to invite you to think of this redevelopment as a way to pass on the blessings of this parish to a new time in a new way.

What's exciting, as I think about what you're beginning to imagine, is the sense that the message that you are called to proclaim—God's blessings for all people—will always be true. What might

be different is how that is expressed through how you shape your mission and exercise your ministry.

Let me tell you a story. Many years ago, a church in a depressed urban city centre was facing challenges. The size of the congregation was decreasing, and with the finances strained they made a courageous decision—they opened up their church building to their neighbours. And the neighbours came in, first in small numbers, then in groups and over the years it became a place where there was housing and services provided for people who were living on the margins of society. And remarkably, over the years, a new worshipping community emerged continuing God's work in a new way, still passing on blessing but with a new sense of mission with ministry appropriate to their new context.¹

Now West Vancouver isn't an urban downtown—it is a place with a unique and particular character—who knows how things will unfold here. Your new Rector Ken is here to accompany you as you seek to align your dreams with God's dream and begin a journey into the future. With Ken you will imagine possibilities and discern to best to continue the work of St. Stephens in a new form. Ken will, I know, challenge you to think outside the box as together you ask questions like “What is our mission in West Vancouver and what will our ministry look like from a new place in a new time?” Asking these questions will engage you with the God who is always calling us to pass on blessings to others as we embrace the future. Pondering how best we can engage in mission and ministry is paying attention to the God who stood beside Jacob in his dream, inspiring Jacob to say, when he awoke, “Surely God is in this place.”

Dreams and visions—and then making plans: that's the work that you're called to engage in together as priest and parish in this next chapter for St. Stephens. The world's most famous Anglican, Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote a book called *God Has a Dream*. In this book he describes how it was his faith in God that inspired him to keep going through the years of apartheid in South Africa even as he experienced racial discrimination, and witnessed how too many in the black community lived in slums while the white majority lived in affluence and luxury. What Archbishop Desmond articulates in this beautiful book is how he understands God's dream: he writes about the message that he received from God; “I have a dream,” God says. “Please help me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family. In God's family, there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Christian, Buddhist and Hindu...all belong.”²

It is that expansive vision that holds together earth and heaven. It's the dream that in God all are one that inspires us to take courage and embrace the future not with certainty but with hope.

¹ Ellis, Norman. *My Parish is Revolting*. Toronto : Hodder and Stoughton, 1975

² Tutu, Desmond. *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for our Time*. New York: Doubleday/Random House, 2004.

And so, we offer our prayers today to ask God to bless this new ministry which Ken and the people of this parish share. We pray that St. Michael and all the holy angels of God will guide you as you move into the future. And we hold before us not only the dream of Jacob but Archbishop Desmond's dream too, one more quote from this book---he writes, "God's dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion."

Togetherness, goodness, compassion—God's dream for us—a message to inspire the mission and ministry and empower as we move with faith into the future. Let's pass on the blessings we've received and be open to what lies ahead.

Preached by the Very Reverend Peter G. Elliott