

**Sermon – St. Thomas, Chilliwack
November 15, 2015**

“Creator we give you thanks for all you are and all you bring to us for our visit within your creation...give us your strength to live together with respect and commitment as we grow in your spirit, for you are God, now and forever. Amen”. [A Disciple’s Prayer Book]

I would like to start by acknowledging that we are a church worshiping on traditional territories taken from the St:lo people. I am profoundly grateful for their continued presence and their traditional and spiritual witness to those of us who inhabit their lands.

My name is Melanie Delva and I am the Archivist for the Anglican Diocese of New Westminster and Provincial Synod of BC and Yukon, a position I have held for ten years this December. I am very pleased to be with you for this, your 142nd anniversary. I mentioned this to a friend of mine, who asked why a church would be celebrating an anniversary that doesn’t end in a 5 or a 0. I said “Aren’t you turning 37 this year? Does this mean I don’t have to get you a gift? The look on her face showed me that every birthday is worth celebrating!

Obviously, I love history, so being in this place at this time is meaningful for me. I have seen many images of this building, some with finely hatted women on the steps, some with the church on massive timber rollers ready to be moved, some with images of early rectors eerily superimposed onto the photo over the church, as if their spectres still held sway over the direction and decisions of the church - as if the living were somehow accountable to the dead.

And maybe they are...?

In preparation for today, I have spent a lot of time thinking about the Rev. George Ditcham, St. Thomas’ first full-time rector. Now, here’s a quintessential colonial clergyman – educated in the old country in St. Augustine’s Missionary College at Canterbury, one could say he was born for a position such as this – a church posting in the centre of a vast and as yet un-“civilized” pocket of colonial presence in the untamed West. In fact, he seemed to revel in the hardship the new outposts threw at him. He wrote in 1878;

“I have [been visiting] three times under difficulties which we get so used to in this country that to write about them would cause the feeling in myself that I was boasting and delighting in vain glory. There is such a great amount of pleasure when one is in full health in the difficulties of travel in a new country that I for one think it capital fun!”

His passion and energy for his work bore much fruit, starting in Yale, Hope and Chilliwack, going on to be Vicar at St. James, Vancouver which still goes strong today.

I can imagine this morning’s Epistle being written to such as Ditcham;

“For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you [George Ditcham], and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will ...that ye might

walk worthy of the Lord ...strengthened with all might...giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.”

Ahhhh, pretty inspiring, isn't it?

But like all humans, Ditcham was not perfect. In the 1880's he was embroiled in a land dispute that ended up going to Provincial Court because he claimed he owned a piece of land in False Creek on which he had built a homestead and cultivated the land – though he had no right or authority to do so. At one point he was even summoned to an inquisition before 5 of his fellow clergy because the bishop had received complaints that he had questionable theology. I can't imagine the inquisition went overly well, as it was shortly thereafter that he departed for England.

When he came back, he was not only Superintendent of the New England Company, he was their “man on the ground” who secured a site for St. George's Indian Residential School in Lytton. He purchased 696 acres of land in two parcels, and in 1902, the Industrial School for Indian Boys at Lytton opened, with our very own Rev. Ditcham as its first principal – only about an hour and a half drive from where we are today. This school would go on to house and “educate” thousands of First Nations children as young as 3 years old and as old as 19. The school was the dream of our own Bishop Sillitoe, and for its first quarter century, St. George's fell under the auspices of the Diocese of New Westminster.

Make no mistake – the Rev. Ditcham was a brave and stalwart missionary who sacrificed much comfort to come to the unfettered West to serve the communities here in the name of Christ. He did some very good work establishing some of our earliest parishes and he also truly believed that educating First Nations children would help to advance them in a growingly settler-controlled culture.

He was also a man who failed to see the face of Christ in the First Nations people he encountered, and instead founded an institution hell-bent on making sure that if any face was to be seen in those of these small children, it would be a mirror image of his own. His tenure at St. George's was the beginning of 8 decades of cultural genocide. I say this not to disgrace Ditcham or his important role in the history of this parish, but to demonstrate that history is always complex. It is not as black and white as we often want things to be. And the road of reconciliation is equally complex.

When I first started this work 10 years ago, my response to what I just said about Ditcham would have been defensive and reactive – I would have quickly asserted that Ditcham was simply “a man of his time”. I would have said he was following the will of the institution and doing his job in the best way he knew how. I would have said “well, we don't think that way anymore and that's a good thing”.

But you see, I was raised in a euro-centric racist family, and I now see that those are not just reasons or excuses meant to make men like Ditcham seem better in hindsight. They are also reasons and excuses we use to make ourselves feel better today. Because if we are brave enough to allow ourselves to become aware of the truths of how Indigenous people are treated in the here and now, and if we are honest with ourselves we have to see that not only do we all have the capacity to be involved in such a system, but we are witness to and beneficiaries of something very similar, if not more insidious in the here and now.

I mentioned my racist upbringing. I confess before you that I approached my work with the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission resignedly at first – figuring if I did what I was supposed to do and handed over our records to the TRC, my work with it would be done, Indigenous people could get over it, and I could get back to my real job.

My internal world started to shift the first time I set eyes on a file of correspondence in our archival records regarding the death of a 8 year old boy in St. George's. I will call him Michael. The correspondence was between the principal of the school, the Indian agent, and Michael's family. He had come down with influenza in one of the epidemics, and when it became clear that he was going to die, the family requested that he be sent home so that he could die in his community. The request was denied. He died in the school and was buried on the school grounds. The family wrote again to the Principal and the Indian Agent asking that Michael's body be exhumed and returned to his community for a traditional burial. The file of correspondence shows the principal and the Indian Agent arguing back and forth about who should cover the costs, and in the end, they wrote back to the family telling them that if they wanted their son back, they would have to pay the exhumation and transportation costs. I put the file back in the box and took out the next one and began reading. File after file. Box after box.

The next 8 years were spent helping hundreds of survivors and former students prove their attendance at residential schools so that they could apply for compensation under the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The next 8 years were also spent was searching for the missing children - ones who never came home. I took this work upon myself because of the story of Michael. I couldn't sleep at night and when I did, I often dreamed of the children whose names and faces I saw in the records. I refused to stop searching for them until I had exhausted every possible source I could lay hands on. I found graves for some of the missing. Some I found alive. Some I could not find at all.

The gospel today is fascinating and challenging to me in several ways. It's a story within a story. Both are stories of healing. One very public and large-scale, and one more intimate. The first is regarding the death of a daughter of a "certain ruler". The Gospel says that the ruler worshipped Christ before asking that he heal his daughter. I often wonder if the ruler would have worshipped Christ had he not needed something from him – the powerful and wealthy seldom humble themselves needlessly. But if his motives were suspect, Christ does not hold this against him and gets up to follow him. In the midst of that journey towards the resurrection of the girl, a woman interrupts the scene. In her desperation to be healed from a condition that left her not only physically weak and ill, but also ceremonially and spiritually unclean and therefore cast off from society, this woman reaches out her hand to touch just the hem of Jesus' garment - with a faith that believes that even just the brush of her fingertip on the dusty, scratchily-woven garment will make her whole. What a faith THAT is!

Christ heals the woman. Christ raises the girl.

I see a parallel between this story-within-a-story and my own healing, and where we are now in reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. There is the larger story of the "rulers" humbling themselves – the government apologies for the residential schools system, the high-level institutional church

apologies for the same, the various institutions and systems realizing their culpability. In the same way that I wonder if the ruler in the story would have worshipped Christ had he not needed something from him, I wonder if the “rulers” in our current story would have humbled themselves had they not been so unequivocally forced to confront the awful Truth that they were in the midst of a systemic Death.

Then there is the smaller, inner story of a broken, bleeding out woman desperate for a chance to truly live. I know that I have been ill and broken as an individual when it comes to relationship with First Nations peoples, and I believe the same has been true for us as a church for a long time. I feel that we have been bleeding out in our negligence in seeing that our history of damage and degradation has paved the way for the damage and degradation we see today – in the land, in the lack of respect for First Nations rights and self-determination, and in our own ignorance and on-going racism. Yet many of us long - as the woman did – for a chance at real Life in the midst of this brokenness.

The good news is that healing is available for all – from the highest rulers with suspect motives, to the blood-stained margin-dwellers. For me, the hem of Christ’s cloak came in the form of the residential school survivors I worked with who forgave me for my racism, helped to heal my brokenness and shame, and took me in as one of their own. But as is the case in both stories, we need to ask for help. We need to pursue reconciliation not because Indigenous people need us to help *them*, but because we are in need of help. Our brokenness has brought us to this place.

If we are humble before the Truth, I have faith – as a person who deserved it least has come to know in the very depths of who I am - I have faith that if we reach out a shaky hand to catch the frayed hem of relationship-building, healing, and a new way forward, Christ will not hesitate to turn his attention from the great rulers and animate our acts of faith into healing.

The 142nd anniversary of St. Thomas, Chilliwack may not end in a 5 or a 0, but it is significant in the wonder that is of all the generations of the faithful and broken whose humanity has kindled this place in the Grace of God. It can also be significant in whatever way we decide it will be from now forward. The Rev. George Ditcham may be one bookend to our story here, but we get to decide what will be the strength that holds up the other end of the story.

But we have to start by understanding our illness, recognizing our need for healing, and then realizing that it’s not something made of the velvet of fanfare, empty words or shame-motivated actions that we are reaching for – it’s the rough, tattered hemline of a humbling Truth and a hope-filled reconciliation that will set us forever free.