

Comfort us again according to the time that thou hast afflicted us, and for the years wherein we have suffered adversity. Show thy servants thy work, and their children thy glory. And let the glorious majesty of the Lord our God be upon us.

I speak to you this evening in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I begin this evening reminding us why we are here, echoing the sermon of my predecessor delivered at the 150th anniversary of the consecration of the first bishop of the Diocese of Saskatchewan, Bishop John McLean. That service was not overly well attended, but for me, the message was one of bishop Michael's best, and through it, the Holy Spirit touched my heart, reminding me of who I am and who the Lord had called me to be. What I share next is in part a proof that the Lord can, will and does build His Church.

As I listened, I remembered the call of the Lord on my life, how he had pursued me since birth, but I resisted him, and how he had come to me in power one night as my friend Tom was preaching yet again the truth and merits of knowing Christ our Lord. Tom himself had met the Lord in power, had been delivered, healed, and forgiven, and now he was on a mission not only to His friends and family, but to anyone the Lord put in His path, to share the good news of Jesus. And I was one such soul, oppressed by our ghostly foe, one of the most unlikely and certainly unworthy people to ever receive the moniker "saint".

But the Lord did not see it that way. He had known me since he formed me in my mother's womb, had been there walking with me since my baptism at three months old in an episcopal church I would not return to for nearly 30 years, wooing me, protecting me, calling to me, though I refused to listen for decades. Tormented, miserable and wallowing in the pig slop, a slop almost entirely of my own making and choosing, the Lord came to me in power, revealed himself to me, called me to repentance, delivered me, and by the power of the Holy Spirit made me a new man.

From that evening I knew Jesus was the Son of God, the very Lord and creator of the universe, he had a plan for my life, and the Holy Scriptures, the Bible was His word. And I set out to know him, and to make him known, devouring the scriptures, seeking to discern what

that plan for my life might be, and spending time every day learning to pray, to speak to and listen to the one I knew was real, alive, and who had transformed me by His mercy and grace. And I began to attend worship, and to become a part of the life, worship and fellowship of the Church, a living member of Christ's mystical body, and a part of that blessed company of all faithful people; the heirs through hope of God's everlasting kingdom.

As I listened to Michael preach that evening, the Lord said to me "remember, remember who you are, and who it is that called you to be. Remember what I have done for you, and that I can and will do this for others. And remember what I have called you to, the church, my body, the people I love and for whom I shed my blood. Remember the mission, our mission, to go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Remember. Remember your passion, your dependence on me, your love for the saints, and that I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. **And tonight, I call us all to do this very thing. Remember who we are.**

More than 150 years have passed since the first Bishop of Saskatchewan stood before faithful Anglicans and spoke to them about Jesus. I certainly had no idea that evening, listening to +Michael, that I would be standing here now, in fear and trembling, speaking to you. I am humbled. I am inadequate in my own strength, and I approach with caution, knowing that what I have to say this night, things that I trust are what the Lord would have me say to you, will resonate as true, but there is also the risk that they will be heard as a bitter pill.

They say that the truth hurts, and there is little value in me pretending this evening that things are not as they are in the Diocese of Saskatchewan today. Furthermore, our *sarx*, our sinful flesh, bends towards bad news, and so often we want to focus on that. We are rubber neckers by nature, and so even as I bring forth some issues we are facing, I intend for us to hear the good news as well, for the Lord who sits on the throne is most certainly with us now, in this very Cathedral by His Holy Spirit, indwelling each and every one of us who have called him Lord and Saviour, empowering us and equipping us for the ministry before us. And He calls us and even in our weariness, and at times even our hopelessness, and says, keep your hands to the plow, for in time we will reap a harvest. And Church, the signs of fruit are already on the vine. Jesus is still building His church, and we must not give up.

And so tonight, first let us remember that great cloud of witnesses, saints of old who have gone before us. We remember as we gather for this 71st synod, all those who have faithfully gone before us, for well over a century and a half, in obedience to Christ and His Great Commission, to ***go therefore and make disciples of all nations***. It is the faithfulness of our forebears, who in prayer, supplication, and Spirit empowered labor for the kingdom, established with God's help, the very foundations of the Diocese of Saskatchewan upon which we stand and upon which we build today. And we do so as they did, by the power of the same Holy Spirit who dwells in and with us, enabling us to worship and serve our Lord Jesus Christ, who because of His great love entered our world as one of us, was crucified, died, was buried, and rose again on the third day.

We must remember that it is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ himself who commissions us as he commissioned the first disciples, saying: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples*” (Matt. 28:18-19 [ESV](#)) Go, in my power, and in my authority. Fear not, for I am with you to the very end. Tell the good news of the kingdom, and share the message of the cross, for “*...when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*”” (John 12:32 [ESV](#)).

Jesus' Great Commission is embedded in the Prayerbook service of consecration of bishops, but the charge is not mine alone, it is yours. All of us, clergy and lay alike, who love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves, are called to this mission. We who place our lives at the foot of the cross and after having received the body of Christ and the blood of the New Covenant together, offer ourselves to Him and to His service, saying: *And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee.*

And so first, let us keep this in our minds and hearts tonight. Remember church who you are.

And so let me turn to the current state of the Diocese of Saskatchewan. None of what I now lay before you are new to the Diocese, or for that matter any church that has ever been. There is nothing new under the sun, and since the time the disciples walked with the Lord until now, every issue we face has reared its head in one way or another in every Diocese and congregation for 2,000 years. There are no surprises here tonight. And so, take comfort, the

Lord is with us, and he knows our every weakness. And may we believe the words Jesus spoke to the apostle Paul when he appealed to him in His weaknesses, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* (2 Cor. 12:9 ESV)

First, our congregations are in decline.

This is not new; we have been experiencing it for decades. For twenty years in parishes in three Dioceses and now as bishop, I have seen it. It is real, and perhaps even more pronounced since the pandemic. But many of you know as I do, that a sense of despair about our decline has been there eating away for decades, even in times when smaller congregations would gather 50 or more on a Sunday. And so, there is a spiritual component to this.

There are certainly many reasons for the decline: cultural changes, the busyness of life, heresies that have tugged at the foundations of our church, divisions that threaten to tear the fabric of our Diocese, and the slow drift of even many of our own families from the fold. But my sense is that there is now a loss of confidence in many, and a growing hopelessness. And it is widespread, whether in the north, south, east, or west of our Diocese the refrain is the same: we need more people, we need young families and children, we need the wayward to return, we feel neglected and, bishop, what are you and we going to do?

I had the privilege of attending the RADVO conference last week in Dallas Texas, and the theme of the conference was hope. As I listened to the speakers more than once I could feel a deep sense of sadness, because I knew what I heard there was true for so many in our Diocese. Our faith is strong. Our love for one another in our congregations is intact. We have held fast and “... *contended for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.*” (Jude 1:3 [ESV](#)) remaining steadfast in the Diocese to the unchanging doctrines and beliefs entrusted to the apostles of old enshrined in Scripture and the Prayerbook. We have for the most part weathered the storms of culture, and the temptations of our secular world. And we have worked very hard together across the Diocese. And yet, in so many places our clergy are spread thin, and the ministry demands at times are overwhelming for clergy and lay alike. **And the truth is, we are tired, and for many there is a sense of despair, not simply about the state of the Church, but about the condition of our world, and ours or the lives of those we love.**

The answer is not to do more, or to do better. It isn't to give more, for we have all given of our time, talents, and treasures for decades. And the answer does not lie in new liturgies or

becoming more relevant. The answer is simpler and at the heart of who we are as Christians. *On Christ the Solid Rock I stand.* This is where our hope is found. It is not in our own gifts and talents, nor our own strength. It is not in any liturgical innovation, new type of music, some prophetic word, or some new program. No. Our hope is built on the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, His righteousness, not our own, His mercy and grace, His promises given to us in our baptism and the great commission, that we are living members of His mystical body, that all power on heaven and earth are His, that he is and will be with us until the end of the age, and that our eternal life in Him is absolutely secure. Brothers and sisters, we live our lives in community, and we do so by faith, trusting the one who bought us with a price.

But, bishop, we have kept our hands to the plow, we have kept the faith, and it just feels like it is not working. **I say to you this evening, the Lord has seen your toil, he has heard your prayers, and he knows your every need. And He is with us in this time, and His call upon us remains.** And I can tell you without hesitation that the Gospel still works and is still *“the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16-17 ESV)* And the answer to what ails us lay there, in the Gospel itself. We must individually, and as congregations, make every effort to have Jesus Christ and the Gospel of salvation at the centre of all we are and all we do.

In our passage this evening from Acts, we see a pattern before of being the Church that was established from the beginning.

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-47 ESV)

Our Anglican way calls us to these same things. We are devoted to the scriptures, devouring the word of God in the context of morning and evening prayer, so that we can know the Lord well, know His ways, recognize His voice, and allow His teaching to be embedded in our own hearts and communities. We are devoted to fellowship in our congregations, a fellowship that is rooted in our baptism, uniting us to one another by the Spirit, the same Spirit who gifts, equips, and empowers us all for ministry. And we are empowered, indwelt by the same Spirit that hovered over the waters of chaos in the beginning, gifting, and calling us, and

working in power to confirm the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to us and to those with whom we share our faith day to day. And we are blessed, given good and perfect gifts from the Father of lights, gifts we offer back to Him for the benefit of the ministry, *for All that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine, All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee.*

And so, what is the answer to the question, “Bishop, what are we going to do?” It is the same for every Christian and congregation since the Lord ascended to heaven: be who you are as Anglican Christians. Worship together, pray together and for one another, bear one another’s burdens, fellowship together, praise the Lord and be thankful together. And we must also be present in our communities as ambassadors of Christ himself. We must take up the mantle of evangelism, to gossip the Gospel with our friends, families, and neighbours. We need to share who Jesus is to us with others and invite them into our gatherings and fellowship. And we must be people who allow the Spirit of God to spread the salt and light of the Gospel through us in our daily lives, and then trust that the Lord will add to our numbers day by day those who are being saved. It has always been this way. The Gospel is literally the announcement of the Good News of what Jesus Christ has done for us. The Lord Jesus Christ is still the Building His Church. It is the primary thing the Lord is doing in our world. It is His mission and ours. And it is our Heavenly Father’s desire: *“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32 [ESV](#))*

There is a second answer that I offer to you as well, and it too is found in our prayerbook, in the comfortable words:

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”” (Matt. 11:28-30 [ESV](#))

We need to remember as we read in Acts, the Lord adds to our number. We need vision, and there are good works that the Lord has prepared for us in advance to walk in, but this task is not a burden he has placed on us. It should be a joy. One of the challenges we have is that we have done it “this way” for many years, if not decades. We know we need change, but change is difficult, and the unknown can bring fear. And so, we can resist change and default back to what we know and have done before, even if whatever it is has failed to produce the results we hoped for.

But what changes can we make? To this end we will be discussing a Mission, Vision and Values statement tomorrow. Under the leadership of Archdeacon Brody Albers, we have held regional meetings to listen and discern together. He will share with you some of the results of this meeting and a draft of the statement for us to discuss, edit, and Lord willing pass at this synod. A new mission statement alone will not repair what is broken, but it can set a new tone for us in the Diocese. My hope is that when it is complete, we will have something that helps guide ministry in our parishes throughout the Diocese, regardless of context. And it is my commitment to help churches fulfill this mission and provide the resources congregations need to implement new things and make the necessary changes to guide us into the future the Lord has for each congregation and the Diocese.

Church membership decline is not our only problem. With decline has of course come financial hardships. Ministry costs, apportionment, and insurance are the big three I hear about the most. Our ministry costs are for the most part fixed by the Council of the North and our stipends are the lowest in the Anglican Church of Canada. Many have said other churches insurance is far lower than our own, as our costs have risen dramatically in recent years. I with our Diocese Accountant have begun looking at other options. The Diocese of Qu'Appelle has switched to a new provider with substantial savings, and we are in discussions with this provider. To date it does not look like we can save with the same coverages we have, including parts we must carry. But we will continue to look. As for apportionment, the Executive Committee has approved a halt on our national church apportionment, and this will be used to reduce parish apportionment in 2025 equitably. But these measures alone will not alleviate our burdens.

Recently there was a meeting of the Executive Committee, Indigenous Council, and Finance Committee together. Our discussions were primarily around the costs of Indigenous ministry, which is running a massive annual deficit, and because of this, we cannot at this time afford to pay a new Diocese Indigenous Bishop.

In other words, financial hardships are also leading to despair for many as the future of many churches is in question. But the answer to this problem is the same as with membership decline, for with growth in our churches and the generous giving of new members will come an increase in financial resources for ministry.

The final issue to be addressed are divisions in our church. These divisions are also not new to the church in any age. If we turn to Paul's First Corinthians, we can see any number of divisions threatening the very existence of one of the earliest Christian congregations. Paul addresses each issue head on, but he does so with a warning:

“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” (1 Cor. 3:16-17 ESV)

In other words, divisions not only threaten to pull congregations apart, but they can be a threat to the Diocese itself. As bishop I have learned that ᐱᐱᐃᐅ (Mâmawi), our togetherness in the Gospel which is so important is at threat. This is not a new issue, and as I have traveled in the north, I have found congregations of faithful Anglican Christians with servant leaders who just like congregations in the south love their Church, love their Lord and want their congregations to be healthy and flourish.

At the same time there is a tension, and a sense that we are not walking together as we should. This is only made more difficult when leaders come into the Diocese from outside, and unnecessarily stir up trouble, in particular politicizing the relationships between clergy and the bishop and between congregations and the Diocese. The truth is the church arrives together whether we like it or not. There is only one Diocese of Saskatchewan, and the future of the Diocese depends on us walking together. Paul is clear:

“in Christ Jesus you are all children of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:26-28 ESV)

We are one in Christ, and we must find a way to live into and strengthen this bond. To this end I intend to revive the twinning of parishes in the Diocese, Indigenous with non-indigenous. We need to be praying for one another, worshipping with one another, fellowshiping with one another, and sharing the gifts God has given us, just as we read in our passage in Acts this evening.

Indigenous Ministry

On September 30, after decades of service to our Lord and to the Diocese of Saskatchewan, our Indigenous bishop Adam Halkett retired. We are grateful to him for His ministry, and he will of course continue to serve the Lord. But His retirement means that there is now only one

Bishop in the Diocese to ordain and confirm. This creates opportunities for me to get to know the parishes and communities in the north in a new way, which I look forward to. But this clearly presents new challenges to my episcopacy, and I ask your prayers for these churches, their communities, and for the future ministry in the North. There far more clergy in First Nations communities than the rest of the diocese, but they are as busy or more so with the responsibilities there. We continue to find qualified people to ordain and for this we are thankful. Pray for them as well, as they must take on new responsibilities.

And finally, we must continue the process of reconciliation. In no way do I intend to minimize what has happened in the past, particularly the role of the Anglican Church in Residential Schools. But we have an obligation in Christ to forgive, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to walk together, and I believe as we do, the Lord will bless us all, as we fulfill His command to love one another as he loved us.

There is so much more that I can say to you this evening, and perhaps in my appendix that will be available to you tomorrow some of your thoughts, concerns and questions will be answered there.

But I will end with this thought. We must recover the missionary roots that founded the Diocese of Saskatchewan in our day. And we must remember that the future of the church, when we have prayerfully done what we believe we are called to do in our day, is not ultimately in our hands, but it is in the hands of the Lord himself. He is our Head, and this is His Church. The task of fulfilling the great commission is ours in the Lord, but the fruit come that is born is His. And so, for us the real task is to keep the Lord Jesus Christ and the Gospel at the center. And we must remember that *Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.*