

A Homily for All Saints

Pamela Thomson

Today we celebrate all who are believers in Christ and those who have died in Christ, known and unknown. Personally, I also celebrate those who follow Christ's teaching and example, including speakers of truth and listeners who listen with love.

The Psalmist, the Prophets, Paul's letters and Jesus' teachings were all spoken aloud and meant to be heard. The Word of God both requires a speaker *and* a listener. (Of course, this idea doesn't exclude you reading the Bible out loud to yourself!)

They all knew agape love towards their God and their sisters and brothers. This agape love is not an emotional, romantic love. It is a chosen attitude born from covenant. When we use our 'agape ears,' we truly listen, and then we hear with covenant love. First Nations people want to talk, want to share, want to be heard, want to be listened to.

Listen to the Psalmist speaking with the voice of an Aboriginal woman. The meaning is the same, but the relevance and the impact are different. We begin to think of our First Nations neighbours in Toronto, or in the Ring of Fire of Northern Ontario, or in Grassy Narrows where there is no safe drinking water, or in Attawapiskat where the promised elementary school opens 14 years after the fire, or in Pikangikum where they are still waiting for both water *and* a school.

Psalm 43 ~Prayer to God in Time of Trouble

¹ Protect me, Creator, and defend my cause against people who have wandered from the path;

from those who are deceitful and unjustly deliver me!

² For you are the Only Great One in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off?

Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?

³ Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me on the good path;

let them bring me to your mountain and to your dwelling.

⁴ Then I will go to the river and smudge, there I will release my simple offering of tobacco to the Creator to release my exceeding joy;

and I will praise you with the drum, Gitche Manito, my Creator.

⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you displeased within me?

Hope in the Creator; for I shall praise the great spirit, my helper, my Creator.

[text: Sandra Campbell]

Sandra's vocabulary is different from our translations. But those words are a true interpretation for her and for many Aboriginal people all over Canada. Two simple examples. The reference to the drum: harps were not part of most people's daily culture. A hill in the desert of Israel would seem high: in Canada we have mountains! A mountain is high enough to be holy, not a mere hill.

Micah was oppressed and colonized, living in a Judah constantly at war. His chapter three is a master 'rant' against the "heads of Jacob and the rulers of the house of Israel." But unlike Rick Mercer, he didn't have much of a sense of humour! Listen with a new ear to an Aboriginal voice speaking God's word to Canadians who, past and present, thought they know best.

Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry "Peace" when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God. But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin. (Micah 3.5-8)

Our ancestors and predecessors came to a land which had been occupied by millions of Indigenous

peoples for thousands of years. And then those ancestors declared themselves the owners of that same land.

Then, we stole their children, and put them in residential schools where their language, customs and practices were forbidden.

The Creator's anger reported by Micah is directed at all of us who have participated directly or indirectly in the atrocious attempts to destroy beliefs and practices, languages and cultures which loved the Creator and all of creation, and which respected every creature and the land upon which they lived.

Are Micah's words at the end of the reading the voice of a child taken from her family at age five or six and plunked back out into the world at age 16? Now this poorly educated, unsupported girl is as vulnerable to the whims of life as a baby. She must quickly find a loving community to fill her with power and with the love of her Creator, of others, and of herself.

Most immigrants to Canada over the years were escaping injustice. We all arrived with our baggage—cultural, linguistic and spiritual. As we settled in, we left some baggage along the way. We adapted other baggage to make ourselves more comfortable. Our dreams changed, or disappeared, or came true to some extent or other. Then we contributed to our communities, helped those less fortunate than we, and supported our churches. Our predecessors and our governments, ignorant of Aboriginal ways, beliefs and languages, started with the attitude St. Paul speaks of towards the community of Thessalonica.

But, we went further. We stepped beyond St. Paul who had learned the ways, the beliefs and the languages of the Greeks and Macedonians. We forced people to do, to think, to speak as we saw fit, and belittled the people who had been caring for this land in a sustainable, respectful way.

Paul worked with existing structures and governments. We worked against the reality of the Inuit, the Métis, the First Nations.

As Christ said, "You who have ears to hear, hear." The Gospel reading for today is entitled "Jesus Denounces Scribes and Pharisees." We are those scribes and Pharisees! It is we who "*tied up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and laid them on the shoulders of others.*" And then we were "*unwilling to lift a finger to move them!*" We, who are escapees from injustice, became beneficiaries of Canadian injustice towards our Indigenous hosts.

It is a hard thing to discern that your society has not done the "right thing." It takes much research, listening and prayer to finally come to the honest conclusion

that what you thought was right was oh so wrong. But guilt takes us, and God, nowhere. It is love that will lead us to act and to speak out in the name of our Creator.

Luckily, Aboriginal people believe in a Creator who is loving and kind. A Creator who has created all of nature as all intertwined, interdependent, and inter-related on this continent of Turtle Island.

My message is not meant to annoy you, or to make you feel guilty. I ask that you open your hearts to hear other voices, to listen to other stories, to sing songs sung by others. And then, I pray you will act with the agape love of Christ, without judgment, without guilt, and with joy. Amen.

Pamela preached this homily at St. Michael and All Angels on Sunday, November 2. She shares it with us as part of our on-going exploration of Aboriginal issues and the place we have in understanding the past and moving into the future. 