

Homily notes 11:15 AM: May 27, Church of the Redeemer

Our sisters and brothers at the Corrymeela Community, Northern Ireland's longest-serving centre for peace and reconciliation, begin their day with these words:

"We pray for all whose day will be difficult,
May we support, may we listen, may we change."

When we pray, we pray with our hands, our feet, our minds, our time, our finances and our bodies. When we support, listen and change, we commit to real change.

God knows, we live in a troubled world where humans have created powerful systems that oppress, divide and assault. Archbishop Oscar Romero said: "the church has to denounce what has rightly been called 'structural sin': those social, economic, cultural, and political structures that effectively drive the majority of our people onto the margins of society."

So, thank you, thank you very much, for the opportunity to offer a few reflections. My name is Michael Shapcott, and I am an ordained vocational deacon at the Church of the Holy Trinity – Trinity Square. The Church of the Redeemer is discerning whether to raise up a vocational deacon, one of the most ancient and wonderful traditions of our church. The Book of Alternative Services tells us that a key responsibility of the sacred order of deacons is: "to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world."

The vocational deacon faces the church and supports the faithful – laity and clergy – in living into our baptismal vows of justice, love and integrity. The vocational deacon faces the world to work alongside others for human dignity and for beautiful Mother Earth herself.

Allow me, as a deacon, to share some of the needs and concerns of the world: Life-threatening climate change; huge economic inequality; poverty and homelessness; toxic masculinity and many forms of gender hatred; cynical and immoral political and business elites; the continuing powerful grip of colonization; racism; sexism; classism; homophobia; transphobia; Islamophobia; oh... the rising threat of nuclear war.

Phew. If you are not totally stressed, then you probably don't appreciate how truly grim is the state of our tired and abused world. And, as bad as things are, who honestly thinks there is a capacity for positive change?

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby delivered a penetrating critique of the 21st century economy in *Dethroning Mammon: Making Money Serve Grace*. He should know: he worked for 11 years as a senior oil executive before answering the call to ordained ministry. Mammon is a great old word that Christians should reclaim: the elevation of greed to the level of a god. Archbishop Justin says mammon is the definition of capitalism lately. He cautions:

“We may think that it is unpleasant to have Mammon on the throne, but, at the same time, we have a nasty suspicion that this false god is pretty firmly stuck in the seat, and that the alternatives are too dreadful to contemplate...”

Archbishop Justin warns us not to internalize the constant refrain that there is no alternative to the current social and economic systems.

If we do dare to raise our voices as Christians, we are told – as a stern parent might correct a wayward child – our faith is “spiritual”, a matter of sentiment and personal taste. In other words: leave the economy, public policy, international relations, the environment and other serious stuff to adults. Obsess about “sinful thoughts”, if you like. Or discuss amongst yourselves what may seem like obscure issues, like the seraphim in today’s reading from Isaiah.

William Stringfellow was an Anglican lay theologian writing in the early 1970s when US president Richard Nixon was one step away from impeachment for corrupt and criminal activities; the US was waging immoral wars around the world; US cities were exploding in economic, social, racial and physical violence; the country was being choked in a blanket of pesticides; and the well-being of millions was being cynically disregarded by government.

Come to think of it, pretty much like today.

Christian leaders who had been welcomed a decade earlier were by the 1970s either dead by assassination, or they were told to keep their talk of love and justice to themselves. Some call William Stringfellow an “authentic prophet in American history”. He wrote in his disturbing and wonderful book *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*:

“The biblical topic is politics. The Bible is about the politics of fallen creation and the politics of redemption; the politics of the nations, institutions, ideologies, and causes of this world and the politics of the Kingdom of God; the politics of Babylon and the politics of Jerusalem... the politics of death and the politics of life...”

The vocational deacon, in pointing to the needs and concerns of the world, gets into pretty bleak territory. But the ministry of the deacon is firmly based in hope.

Just last month, the Archbishop of Canterbury released his second book, called *Reimagining Britain: Foundations for Hope*. He writes:

“Moments of change are moments of great hope and opportunity... This is true provided that the hope for change may be built upon values of virtue and grace, of love and common humanity, and not on selfishness, inward-looking self-absorption, self-protection and fear.”

Time will tell whether Archbishop Justin’s detailed expression of hope will have the same widespread impact as the work of an earlier Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. His pioneering call for a politics of love expressed in public health, education, housing, welfare and

full employment was realized in the post-1945 Britain and elsewhere, including Canada. All of us alive today are beneficiaries of the hope and robust love of Archbishop William – even as neoliberal politics have relentlessly attacked those gains over the past three decades.

A parish priest who faithfully served our Anglican Church in western Canada for decades, the Rev. Gavin Rumsey, was both ordinary and extraordinary. He said:

“... there is a deep hope as you know, it’s the wellspring of life. When you are treated with respect and dignity it sows a seed of hope in your heart. That love that goes out to you is saying, ‘I’m okay. Life is okay. I can face the challenge of life,’ and that seed grows in you. When you treat others with respect and dignity, it plants the seed of hope in their hearts, and they can live in this ambiguous world which is so beautiful and so terrible. You give hope, you receive hope. It is a precious gift.”

Hope is a necessary part of the work of the vocational deacon – the hope that flows from love.

Which brings me to Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church. Many millions got a taste of Bishop Michael as they watched his address at the Royal Wedding last weekend. He spoke of the muscular power of love. Bishop Michael said:

“The late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr once said, and I quote: ‘We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that, we will be able to make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way.’ There’s power in love. Don’t underestimate it. Don’t even over-sentimentalize it. There’s power - power in love.”

Bishop Curry is so much more than a great wedding preacher. This past Thursday, he joined with 2,000 other Christians in a candle-lit march to the White House in Washington for the Reclaiming Jesus movement. Their common statement:

“The church’s role is to change the world through the life and love of Jesus Christ. The government’s role is to serve the common good by protecting justice and peace, rewarding good behavior while restraining bad behavior. When that role is undermined by political leadership, faith leaders must stand up and speak out... It is often the duty of Christian leaders, especially elders, to speak the truth in love to our churches and to name and warn against temptations, racial and cultural captivities, false doctrines, and political idolatries—and even our complicity in them.”

Time will tell whether Reclaiming Jesus will have the same profound impact as the movements for civil rights, an end to the Vietnam war and social and economic rights did in the 1960s.

What about here in Toronto: this parish, neighbourhood, city, province and country?

All of us in our baptismal covenant “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbour as yourself...” That’s a big job and, if we are honest, we need to work together to realize this.

The ministry of the vocational deacon supports the church – laity and clergy – through servant-leadership. As Redeemer continues your discernment on the diaconate, remember that the deacon is raised by your community to support you in responding to the needs, concerns and hopes of you and those around you.

Last summer, more than 80 deacons from across Canada gathered for our triennial conference. One lively topic was the simple question: What does one call a gathering of vocational deacons? After much thoughtful conversation, we decided on the word “disturbance”.

A group of deacons is a “disturbance of deacons”.

Deacons are to disturb the sometimes smooth veneer of the church by calling Christians to live deeply into their baptismal vows. Deacons are to disturb the sometimes smooth veneer of the world by pointing to human dignity and the integrity of creation.

From that disturbance can come moments of hope, and moments of change.

Finally, lest you think I am a theological philistine, let me redeem myself with a brief reflection on seraphim. Earlier, I suggested some may think that the seraphim in today’s reading from Isaiah have nothing to do with our real lives. That’s not me.

The powerful vision of Isaiah is of strange creatures who are literally burning, burning with the love of God. The Hebrew word saraph conjures up incredible heat and power, and some suggest its roots can be traced to one of the words for love. So, the vision that inspires Isaiah in his prophetic ministry is a fiery hot vision of love that purifies him as he enters into the world.

That’s a powerful vision that can propel vocational deacons, and the entire body of the faithful, forward into a world that is desperate for love and for justice and for integrity.

The community of deacons in Toronto will hold the Church of the Redeemer in our thoughts and prayers as you continue to discern whether to raise up a vocational deacon.

I will end with these words from the morning prayer of the Corrymeela Community:

“We resolve to live life in its fullness:
We will welcome the people who’ll be part of this day.
We will greet God in ordinary and hidden moments.”

Amen.

And amen again.