

Sermon
given by
Archbishop Fred J. Hiltz, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada
at the Service of Holy Eucharist with the
Ordination to the Diaconate of James Mosher
and the
Ordination to the Priesthood of Charlene Scriver
The 47th Session of Synod of the Diocese of Algoma
St. Luke's Cathedral, Sault Ste. Marie, ON
Wednesday, May 6, 2015

"Lift up your hearts"
We lift them to the Lord

What a wonderful theme for this day when the church local gathers in Synod, - taking counsel together and renewing commitments to God's mission in Jesus Christ.

What a wonderful theme for this day when those called to the office and work of a deacon and of a priest in the Church of God are ordained.

The one whose feast we keep this day is generally known in relation to Peter as "the other disciple" or "the one whom Jesus loved". He is the one who at the Last Supper reclines closest to Jesus. He is the one who hears not only the words of Jesus but the very heart out of which they are spoken. He is the one who brings Mary to the foot of the Cross upon which her son hung for the redemption of the world. Into his hands the dying Saviour commends the care of his dear mother from that hour read the Scriptures "he took her to his own home".

Tonight's gospel reading is the story of that first Easter morning. Having found the stone rolled away from the entrance of the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed, Mary Magdalene runs to tell Simon Peter and the other disciples, the one whom Jesus loved. They both run to the tomb, - note the evangelist's detail - but the other disciple outruns Peter and he reaches the tomb first. He looks into the tomb but does not enter. One wonders if what Jesus had said in the Upper Room might have crossed his mind, - what he had said about having power to lay down his life and power to take it again.

As Peter arrives a few minutes later he goes into the tomb and sees all the evidence, - grave clothes in a heap and the napkin that had been around Jesus' head folded up in a place by itself. Only then does John go into the tomb. The text says "he saw and believed". (John 20:8) One wonders if what Jesus had said to the disciples might have crossed his mind "a little while and you will see me no longer and again a little while and you will see me. You have pain now but I will see you again and your hearts shall rejoice."

As John's pain give way to rejoicing his joy is made all the more complete when on that very evening the risen Lord appears among the disciples revealing his hands and his side and speaking to them a word of peace.

Some weeks later the disciples we are told had been fishing all night but had caught nothing. A shadowy figure on the shoreline called out to them to fish from the right side of the boat and so great was the catch they could hardly haul it in. Instinctively John knew it was Jesus and he said to the rest of the disciples, "It is the Lord!" (John 21:7) In an instant Peter jumped out of the boat and waded through the waves to embrace Jesus and John quietly comes to shore with the rest of the disciples. After a breakfast of fish and bread on the beach, Jesus took Peter for a stroll along the water's edge. Determined to undo Peter's three-fold denial, he asks him in three-fold fashion, "Do you love me?" (John 21:15, 16, 17) With each response Jesus commends Peter to the work of shepherding the Church in its earliest days. No sooner is the commission given that Peter sees that John is following them. "What about him?" (John 20:21) says Peter. The response comes quickly. "If it is my will that he remain until I come what is that to you? Follow me!"

In time as we know Peter would end up in Rome and die the death of a martyr – John would end up in Ephesus and live into old age and die of natural causes.

Those who gathered around him and his teaching would become known as the Community of the Beloved Disciple and out of that commentary would emerge the Gospel and the three letters that bear the name of John in the New Testament.

This gospel is not so much a tracing of Jesus' ministry and a synopsis of his words and works as it is a theological reflection on the loving purposes of God enfleshed in the person and work of Jesus.

It is the gospel of late night, early morning and midday encounters that turn into intense dialogues with incredibly untrusting people. It is the gospel of signs that turn into lengthy discourses revealing God's ways with his people from the days of Moses and all the prophets and now in the sending of his Son into the world. It is the gospel of the great I am saying, - drawing on images from everyday life, - images that speak of nourishment, light, guidance, love care and protection, and abiding in Him; these sayings are at the very core of the Church's ministry of Word and Sacrament, at the very heart of our approach and exercise of pastoral care.

Each one reveals something of who Jesus is and what he is about in the world. Each one is an invitation drawing us more fully into the embrace of our Lord's love and the life he wills for each and everyone.

No other gospel takes us more fully into the last hours Jesus shared with his disciples in the Upper Room. The meal gives way to the foot washing and the teaching associated with this humble act. That gives way to the new commandment, - to love one another, - and that to an intimate conversation in which Jesus speaks of the disciples abiding in him, the work he is calling them to do in the world and the Spirit who will grace and guide them daily. He discloses his deep desire for their friendship, their companionship in his on-going mission. Having spoken with passion to them, he then turns to the Father in prayer, - for his consecration to accomplish the work given him, for the consecration of the disciples in the work he had given them, and for the consecration of all those who would come to believe

through their word into that prayer every generation of the Church is gathered, even to our own day.

I have always loved the note of purpose with which John concludes his account of the Gospel. These things are written that you may come to believe that “Jesus is the Son of God and that believing you may have life in his name”. (John 20:31)

At the very end, he writes, but there are also many other things that Jesus did...if everyone of them were to be written, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

However many there might be and however they might be titled, the subtitle for each could well be “Lift up your hearts!” (John 15:11) Lift up your hearts and know the love God revealed in Jesus. Lift up your hearts and know the life he wills for you and for all people. Lift up your hearts and know the joy of the Gospel!

Pope Francis is speaking of a new evangelization of the world, one marked by that very joy of which Jesus speaks. “I have said all these things to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy be complete.”

“Our joy as Christians” writes Francis, “drinks from the wellspring of Christ’s brimming heart”.

One only has to read the Acts of the Apostles to know the joy that marked the life of the early Church, - the way they opened the scriptures; said their prayers, shared their meals; held things in common and helped all those in need; the way entire households rejoiced in baptisms; the way entire communities were growing in the grace of the Lord Jesus.

One only has to read Paul’s letters to see how the theme of joy runs through them like a beautiful thread. In every age Paul encourages the Church with those magnificent words to the Philippians. “Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say Rejoice.” (Philippians 4:4) Centuries later Charles Wesley will set that call to hymnody in his great hymn, “Rejoice, the Lord is King” and it’s refrain, “Lift up your heart, Lift up your voice: rejoice an again I say, rejoice!”

Everywhere in our Church I sense a renewed joy in the Gospel and every work to which it calls us.

- proclaiming the good news
- teaching, baptizing, nurturing not just the new believers, but all the believers in life-long discipleship
- responding to human need by loving service
- transforming unjust structures of society challenging violence of every kind pursuing peace and reconciliation
- caring for the earth

These Marks of Mission have taken a wonderful hold in our Church. From coast to coast to coast they have inspired ministry action plans within parishes and dioceses. They have become a primary point of reference for the ministries of the General Synod, the Primate’s

World Relief and Development Fund (PWRDF) and the Anglican Foundation of Canada (AFC). I know these Marks of Mission have taken hold in your diocese and that they have inspired diocesan-wide initiatives in growing healthy congregations, nurturing authentic evangelism, celebrating the place of children and youth in the Church, empowering clergy and laity for spirited leadership, giving attention to the place of the liturgy in our tradition, and honouring Christ's gospel through ministries of outreach and advocacy for those in need in our own communities and around the world, and in telling the stories of faith in action, of ministries that transform us and re-shape the world. In all this work you have been blessed by the heart of your bishop for this vision for the diocese, by the Rev. Dr. Jay Koyle and his exceptional work as Congregational Development Officer, by all those engaged in the work of the Strategic Plan Implementation Team chaired by Craig Hurst. This comprehensive report in the Convening Circular for Synod leaves us with much to celebrate by way of accomplishment, and much to ponder by way of things yet to come. Indeed the 47th Session of Diocesan Synod is a time to lift up your hearts, in thanksgiving for God's wondrous grace and work in and through all your ministries.

While this Synod will long be remembered as a joyous event in the life of the diocese it will be especially remembered by those who shall be ordained this evening. James as a deacon. Charlene as a priest.

In a little book called "Here I Am: Reflections on the Ordained Life", Richard Giles writes, "Those who are ordained must by nature, be absolutely fascinated by God, - full of awe and wonder in the words and ways of God with this world...They must also be absolutely fascinated by and tirelessly interested in people, knowing that this fragile and funny stuff called human nature is the raw material of God's ceaseless re-creating." "We, who are ordained, are called" writes Giles, "to be artists of community. We have the supreme privilege of shaping with our hands, on proclamation of the Gospel, our presiding at the sacraments of our redemption and our prayer, communities of faith, caravans of pilgrims who will together discover the love, healing, hope and transformation of life in God's grace."

In keeping with the theme of Synod it seems to me that the vocation of all the ordained is essentially a calling of the whole People of God to "Lift up their hearts."

In the first instance it is a call to worship the divine God. Then it is a call to give thanks to God for blessings beyond our asking, imagining or capacity to number. Sometimes that call will be in search of the mercies of God, some in search of some consolation, some pardon, some hope of reconciliation. Sometimes that call manifests itself in accompanying an individual or family through a particularly difficult time, or in drawing together for community prayer in the midst of a tragedy that has rocked everyone, or in drawing together a nation in mourning or a world reeling from yet another atrocity against humanity.

A call to lift up our hearts in thanksgiving not only in the lives and labours of the saints of old and in the witness of holy men and women in every age but also in lives and labours of those who walk among us this day. Those who are as lights in an often darkened world and healers in an often hurting world. Those whose lives are so beautifully oriented by the Gospel of Christ that his sweet fragrance lingers wherever they go.

In a very particular way a deacon is called to lift up the Gospel of Jesus and to lift up the hopes of the poor, the sick, the lonely, the marginalized and oppressed.

In a very particular way a priest is called to lift up the bread of life, and to lift up the cup of salvation, to lift the hearts of the people into the presence of the divine mysteries we celebrate.

All of us who are ordained are called in a very particular way to lift up on high the name of Jesus, and to daily lift life heavenward.

The work calls to mind the holy counsel given by M. Ramsay to a group he was about to ordain. He spoke of their ministry as being oriented by two movements. In the one, he said, you are with the people with God on your heart. In the other you are with God with the people on your heart. The one is a ministry of presiding and preaching and pastoring. It is a ministry of nurturing people in discerning the grace of God at work in their lives discovering some gift of the Spirit and encouraging them to use that gift in building up the body of Christ. The other is a ministry of praying for those we committed to our care. It's the work of intercession, - some would say it's the last work of the day, - to sit in silence and bring before God according to their joys and sorrows, needs and hopes, those whom we have encountered that day, - commending them one and all to the love mercy of God. And having done that, to then lie down and take one's rest.

It's a lovely pattern for the exercise of priestly ministry. Sometimes as many of us will attest it is interrupted by a late night church meeting, a pastoral emergency, a call from the hospital, a local shelter, the prison, the RCMP, or some poor soul desperate for a listening ear and a word of guidance, consolation or direction. Be that as it may, the pattern from time to time is worth maintaining. It's a lovely pattern for the work of a priest and it's one you can nurture in others.

Tonight we lift up our hearts in thanksgiving for John the Evangelist and the treasure his great Gospel is. Tonight we lift up our hearts in thanksgiving for the movements of the Holy Spirit in renewing the life of the Church in this diocese. Tonight we lift up our hearts in thanksgiving for God's call in the life of those who are being ordained, and we pray that the same Holy Spirit which has hovered over them through years of discernment, training and formation for priestly ministry may now rest upon them and grace them for every good work in this sacred calling. Amen.