

Opening Eucharist
The Synod of the Diocese of Algoma
May 8, 2019

“Heaven and earth have been gathered!”

What a glorious gospel!

What wonderful news!

What a breath taking vision, taking us as John Bell writes, “to that place from which tide and time flow” and back again and to those moments when “angels tread on our dreams and the magnificent themes of heaven’s promise are echoed below.” (Hymn 489, Common Praise)

What a lovely theme for your Synod, this gathering of laity and clergy from every parish throughout the diocese gathering together with your archbishop to take counsel together for the renewal of your calling as the Church, in and for the world.

Drawn from the very words with which St. Paul greets the Church in Ephesus it reminds us of God’s design for the gathering of all things in Christ. “With all wisdom and insight” Paul writes, “God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth”. (Ephesians 1: 8-10)

It is this manner of speaking and this vision that inspires the prayer of the people of God when we say “your Kingdom come O God, your will be done on earth as in heaven”. It is the vision that inspires and informs our labour in the world. It is this vision that has moved the Church from the earliest of times to gather in Vigil on the night when Christ was raised from the dead, to kindle a new fire and to light the Candle of the Paschal Mystery, to carry it into the assembly, to gather around its sacred flame, to draw light from it, and then to sing, “O night truly blessed, when heaven is wedded to earth and we are reconciled to God!” through Christ.

It is this vision that has inspired the Church to sing on that other most holy of nights, the night of His birth.

“For lo, the days are hastening on,
by prophets seen of old,
when with the ever-circling years
shall come the foretold:
when the new heaven and earth shall
own the Prince of Peace their King,
and the whole world send back the song
which now the angels sing.”
(Hymn 140, v. 5, Common Praise)

“Heaven and earth have been gathered”

Of this vision the psalmist writes

“Mercy and truth have met together;
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
Truth shall spring up from the earth,

and righteousness shall look down from heaven
Righteousness shall go before him,
and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.
(Psalm 85: 10, 11, 13, The Book of Alternative Services)

As people of faith, as people who endeavour to abide by the teaching of the prophet “to love kindness, to do justice and to walk humbly with God;” (Micah 6:8) as people who endeavour to live the gospel of Jesus, to make the Beatitudes a standard for our life together in Christ, a point of reference for our labours in his name – we are deeply aware of the urgency of our calling at this time in history “to be active collaborators with God for the transforming of the world”. That manner of describing our calling comes to us from a World Council of Churches (WCC) Conference on World Mission and Evangelism held in Tanzania in March 2018. From Arusha, a call to Transforming Discipleship was issued to all the Churches of the WCC. Its read of the world is stark.

Here is what it says:

“Despite some glimmers of hope, we had to reckon with death-dealing forces that are shaking the world order and inflicting suffering on many. We observed the shocking accumulation of wealth due to one global financial system, which enriches few and impoverishes many (Isaiah 5:8). This is at the root of many of today’s wars, conflicts, ecological devastation, and suffering (1Timothy 6:10). This global imperial system has made the financial market one of the idols of our time. It has also strengthened cultures of domination and discrimination that continue to marginalize and exclude millions, forcing some among us into conditions of vulnerability and exploitation. We are mindful that people on the margins bear the heaviest burden.

These issues are not new for 2018, but the Holy Spirit continues to move at this time, and urgently calls us as Christian communities to respond with personal and communal conversion,...

This Call from Arusha speaks to both personal and communal conversion. It speaks to us as individual disciples signed with the cross and marked as Christ’s own forever, and to our life together as communities of disciples. It speaks to what we are about in our parishes, our profile and our reach into the wider community. It speaks to what we are about in a Synod taking counsel together for the renewal of the Church in the service of God’s mission in the world. It speaks to a holistic view of discipleship.

Here is a sampling.

“We are called by our baptism to transforming discipleship: a Christ-connected way of life in a world where many face despair, rejection, loneliness, and worthlessness.”

“We are called to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ—the fullness of life, the repentance and forgiveness of sin, and the promise of eternal life—in word and deed, in a violent world where many are sacrificed to the idols of death (Jeremiah 32:35) and where many have not yet heard the gospel.”

“We are called to be formed as servant leaders who demonstrate the way of Christ in a world that privileges power, wealth, and the culture of money (Luke 22:25-27).”

“We are called to joyfully engage in the ways of the Holy Spirit, who empowers people from the margins with agency, in the search for justice and dignity (Acts 1:8; 4:31).”

“We are called to break down walls and seek justice with people who are dispossessed and displaced from their lands—including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers—and to resist new frontiers and borders that separate and kill (Isaiah 58:6-8).”

“We are called to be faithful witnesses of God’s transforming love in dialogue with people of other faiths in a world where the politicization of religious identities often causes conflict.”

“We are called to care for God’s creation, and to be in solidarity with nations severely affected by climate change in the face of a ruthless human-centered exploitation of the environment for consumerism and greed.”

There is about this call from Arusha a breadth and a boldness with respect to our life and labours in Christ that is daunting if not indeed overwhelming. There is also about it a great humility.

“It is not a call that we can answer in our own strength. So the call becomes in the end, a call to prayer” for the grace we need to fulfill the calling as the community of the baptized whose work is to be as salt flavouring the world with the values of the gospel and to be as the sweet fragrance of Christ that lingers wherever we go.

Those called into leadership as deacons and priests, and bishops too, are to be “artists of community” nurturing people for intentional, holistic, lifelong discipleship; understanding it is not just assent to the articles of faith, but a way of living that takes its orientation from this breathtaking vision of heaven and earth gathered in Christ, the whole word sending back the song which now the angels sing, the angels treading on our dreams and the magnificent themes of heavens promise being echoed below”.

In endeavouring to live this call, we are encouraged and inspired by holy women and men of every generation. Today we remember a 14th Century woman, Julian of Norwich and a man of our own time, Jean Vanier, giving thanks for their witness to this vision.

Julian of Norwich was an English woman of great faith. In a time of serious illness, she was granted over the period of a couple of days - May 8 and 9 in 1373 - a number of visions of Christ Crucified. Her reflections on those visions are captured in her only work “The Revelations of Divine Love”. “Love”, she wrote, “was our Lord’s meaning. And I saw for certain both here and elsewhere that before he made us, God love us and that his love has never slackened nor ever shall”. She spoke of Jesus as our ever “courteous Lord”. “I saw”, writes Julian, “that he is to us all things that are good and sustaining to our help. He is our clothing that for love wrapeth us and windeth us, surroundeth us and all becloseth us, hangeth about us for tender love, such that he may never leave us. And so in this sight I saw that he is to us all things that is good, as to my understandings”.

Many to this day, find both comfort and strength in the words that Julian said Christ gave her.
“I can make all things well.
I will make all things well.
I shall make all things well,
and thou canst see for thyself
that all manner of things shall be well.”

Here is a woman who took heart in this vision of heaven and earth being gathered in Christ.

Jean Vanier was a Canadian, a devote Roman Catholic, an avid ecumenist, and the founder of the L'Arche Communities around the world. He was absolutely committed to living among people who as he would say are “otherly abled” celebrating their dignity as children of God; caring for their physical, emotional and spiritual well-being; enabling them to embrace life and to enjoy it in the good company of their brothers and sisters in community.

Jean always spoke of how blessed he was to have loving parents who cared for him, trusted him and encouraged him to be himself. And he was never more fully himself than when he was in residence in a L'Arche Community, nor when he was reflecting in the Gospel from the perspective of his life in L'Arche. At one point in his life, he said the Church taught him the faith, and in and through L'Arche he learned to live it. This week, L'Arche communities around the world mourn his death, but rejoice in the love with which he founded and nurtured the quality of life they know in Christ.

Vanier spoke much and wrote much. He was particularly enamored with the Gospel of John. In the introduction of his book, “Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John”, he wrote

“What I share in these pages is the music I have heard behind these words and the flow of the Gospel of John. I have listened to the song, which warmed and stirred my heart, opened up my intelligence, gave hope, meaning and orientation to my life, with all that is beautiful and all that is broken within me, and meaning to this world of pain in which we live. I want to sing this song, too even if my voice is weak and sometimes wavers so that others may sing it and that together we may be in the world singing a song of hope to bring joy where there is sadness and despair.”

Vanier died peacefully this week and will be buried in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection from the L'Arche Community in Trosly-Breuil, France!

Julian of Norwich and Jean of Trosly. They lived centuries apart yet in Christ they were one. They were one in their living of the Gospel, one in the legacy of their labours in Christ's name and love, each of them given to those works of which Jesus speaks in the Gospel reading appointed for this liturgy: each of them was graced by that wisdom of which Solomon writes, “She is a breath of God, a pure emanation of the Almighty, a reflection of external light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, an image of God's goodness.” (Wisdom 7: 25-26)

In every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets”.

Julian and Jean, - chosen vessels of God's grace and lights of the world in their respective generations. Faithful servants of God whose lives were inspired and oriented and directed by this vision of heaven and earth he gathered in Christ by this call to be "collaborators with God for the transforming of the world", by the breath taking vision of "the angels of God treading on our dreams and the magnificent themes of heaven's promise being echoed below".

May God give us every grace, wisdom and strength we need for the labour that accompanies our prayer, "Your Kingdom come, you will be done on earth as in heaven". Amen