

October 18th, 2021

St. Luke the Evangelist

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring good tidings, who publish peace.” (Isaiah 52.7)

Sermon by Archbishop Anne for St. Luke’s Cathedral Patronal Festival 2021

It wasn’t too many years ago that I was in parish ministry and led groups of teens and adults through a Confirmation program ahead of the Bishop’s annual visit. I always learned so much - from the program itself and from the confirmands. This happened again last year when the group from Thunder Bay deanery invited me and the Primate onto one of their Zoom sessions. Their thoughtful questions along with their passion for social justice, for care of creation was very impressive.

One of the activities that I embarked on with the confirmands was an art project on big sheets of newsprint strewn over the floor on which we drew the inside of a church building. We marked the various parts of the including all the holy hardware in the sanctuary. For many people the names don’t really matter especially as the vocabulary is particularly churchlandish and for some people utterly unrelated to life and ministry. I expect that many of you know the part of the building quite well - the nave, the chancel, sanctuary, chancel, quire, transepts east and west, aisle, apse, organ, crossing, ambulatory, spire, bell tower, gargoyle, baptismal, credence table, chalice paten, burse and veil and pall.

I thought about this a few weeks ago when Presiding Archbishop Michael Currie spoke about one particular area in the church building – the narthex in his sermon to the Episcopal House of Bishops.

In our Cathedral the narthex is that space at the very back where you enter from Brock street and from which you leave. As you came in today you were welcomed by the greeters, handed a bulletin, signed a sheet for covid tracking purposes, hung up your coat and greeted a few of your friends. Perhaps you slipped through it quickly and didn’t notice much about it at all.

In the narthex of St. Luke’s there is a framed picture with a Coventry Cross of nails in it, with the words ‘Father Forgive’ on a poster. It’s from the doors at the end of the narthex the Dean exits to lead that Litany on Fridays at noon. There is a stone from Canterbury Cathedral in St. Luke’s narthex and a memorial book. It’s the place where the Liam our crucifer stands on the border between the narthex and the nave and the choir and others in the processional party line up. It’s the place where I have sat on any number of occasions and enjoyed the Junior’s pancake breakfast on Shrove Tuesday or participated in one of Erin Hernden’s quizzes.....perhaps this year’s will have questions about the parts of a church building in it!

We are all familiar with narthex’s, aren’t we? If you look on the walls of narthex’s you will often see photos of bishops and clergy in framing smile back at people as

they hurry by and where announcements and lists are pinned onto walls requesting help or offering help, where mission and vision statements are hung and sometimes left unread and not acted upon for decades.

The narthex is the place where newcomers, strangers or the wanderer wonders whether they will be welcomed, where old friends meet again; and where someone ushers those hanging around in or out or through. The place for the 'lost and found'. It's the in-between room, a lot like our vestibule at home.

Narthex. Definitely churchlandish!

Now, hold that image of the physical narthex for a moment. Think about all the really good ministries that happen there at St. Luke's every week...the room that connects us with the outside world, the place of hospitality and welcome.

Presiding Bishop Michael Currie lifted up a different image of narthex in his homily to the House of Bishops in The Episcopal Church on September 21st of this year – the second year of Covid-19.

He described the narthex as much more than just a physical space within a church building but as a place of waiting and transformation.

Here are his words:

It is the in-between room, but more than just the in-between room. Narthex is that space that actually is the link between the world and the church. It is that space that actually is the link between the sacred and the profane. It is the space, that in-between

space, where existence is actually lived and looked at differently. It may well be that thin place where time and eternity intersect, where divine and human actually meet, where there is a co-mingling between God and God's creation and God's people. Narthex. More than just a physical name, but it may mark the place. A threshold. A crossing. A confusing place. A liminal space. In 2016 before the pandemic, Richard Rohr wrote this about narthex. Actually, he was talking about liminal space.

He said, "We too often remain trapped in what we call normalcy — 'the way things are.' Life then revolves around problem-solving, fixing, explaining, and taking sides with winners and losers . . . To get out of this unending cycle, we have to allow ourselves to be drawn into sacred space, into liminality. All transformation takes place here. We have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of 'business as usual' and remain patiently on the 'threshold.' The limen, in Latin, the betwixt and between, the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone our old world is left behind. There alone we meet the new existence of which we are not yet sure. It's a good place, for there alone genuine newness begins. It is the realm where God can get at us because our false certitudes are finally out of the way. This is the sacred space where the old world falls apart and a bigger new world is revealed. It is the doctor's waiting room. And our call is to wait on the divine physician." (partial paraphrase)

What a stunning way to describe *this* time in our worried live. A waiting room. A sacred space and a classroom where God can get at us where we learn to let go of our old way of being and prepare for the new thing that God is about to do in our midst.

The other space in our church that is so important for Christians is the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ that we gather around every time two or more people meet in Jesus name for worship on Sundays or other occasions during the week. The Latin word for Gospel is *evangelium* – a messenger, one who carries good news. It's not something made of bricks and mortar at all, but is the very heart and pulse of our faith community.

Today's Gospel for our patronal festival of St. Luke, beloved physician, Evangelist and teacher is that passage of Scripture that is the opening scene of ministry for Jesus. It is his manifesto for the work ahead, revealing so much to us about who Jesus is, what Jesus will do, and for whom Jesus has come.

These words of Jesus are not only important for what they say but because of their source. The origin of these words is important too. Jesus isn't making this up but rather situates his ministry and everything that is going to happen in and through him in the ongoing promise and commitment of God, to the lowliest of God's servants; to the hungry, to God's people from the time of Abraham and Sarah to the present time.

These words, originally spoken by the prophet Isaiah provides the theological trajectory that Jesus will articulate and embody in the Gospel of Luke.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4: 18-21)

As Christians, whatever we take to be the heart of the gospel will be the central and shaping force in our life of faith. Luke, the beloved physician, evangelist and teacher, the patron saint of our Cathedral Church is saying to us today that these words of hope from the Divine Physician is the plumb line of Jesus's ministry. The implication of course is that if we are going to study, interpret, and follow the gospel we should keep coming back to this text to measure our work.

The way Luke tells the story is that it happens in real time. There is GOOD NEWS today for the poor and the oppressed, for those who find themselves living at the margins of society. When Jesus looks up at the gathering of people in the Temple he says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (vs. 21)

In his lifetime the Divine Physician proclaimed the good news of the kingdom in a thousand ways. His words brought new life, comfort and hope to everyone who heard them. Injustice and poverty

are contrary to the way in which God intends life on earth to be lived, and in everything he did and said Jesus brought that message of hope.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are persecuted”, says Jesus, and the words are true, even though those who hear them are no better off than before. His presence and touch brought healing and wholeness. “I do choose. Be made clean,” he tells the leper, and he is cleansed. “Little girl, get up” he says and a child is raised from the dead. “Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid” he tells the terrified disciples in the boat, and the storm is calmed. And then he turns to all of us, his would be followers and says: “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” And that is what we are, and must be even though we might be feeling decidedly dim or flavourless at the time.

As Jesus made that text his own, if favour, comfort, gladness, building, and repairing are the ways Jesus did ministry, then this is a pattern he is asking us to follow too, especially as it finds bringing hope to people who find themselves on the margins of our society or in our churches. Many of these people know a God who appears far away and silent.

So let’s go back for a moment to the narthex...the waiting room, the space that connects heaven and earth and imagine what ministry God might be calling us to do now as we leave behind the securities

and certainties of what was and begin to imagine something new in our time.

God is asking us take new risks and be: *‘vulnerable as we watch the new normal emerging among us the blind see, lepers are cleansed, students get debt canceled, the poor have health care, workers have a living wage, the atmosphere breathes fresh air’ (Walter Brueggeman).* And in Canada, that northern communities have fresh, clean water.

I don’t know about you, but when I’m afraid its easier to curl up and do nothing or wish upon a star that I can go back to the way things were before. I think that’s why we’ve been giving this ‘narthex time’ in which we continue to be transformed into the new creation the Divine Physician is calling us to be in and for a world that is waiting to be healed.

My motto for 2022:

“So if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!” (2.Corinthians 5.17)