

Homily
Church of St. John the Evangelist, Elora
October 2, 2022
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May only God's word be spoken and only God's word be heard, we ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, God's living Word. Amen.

Before speaking about the scripture readings this morning, I want to tell you a little story. I'll call it the "Parable of the Clock".

Some years ago, I purchased a regulator clock. Some of you may know what that is. They were all the fashion many years ago in schoolrooms, particularly in rural places. They count the hours. At 12 you got 12 gongs. And they even mark the half hour – probably to remind the teacher that it's time to move on to the next topic. They gong 180 times a day, 1260 times a week. And you know what? I almost never hear it. In fact, because it is in a location where you can hear it almost everywhere in the house, when people come and visit me, they'll ask, "How do you stand that constant ticking?" I could answer, "What ticking?" I almost never hear it or most of the gongs.

There's something about that clock story that I think has significance today, and I will mention them to you a little later. But first, some thoughts on today's scripture readings. In particular, I want to look at the gospel and set it into a context. The events that it records happen as the disciples and Jesus are making their way on their last trip to Jerusalem. And they didn't need a crystal ball or even supernatural knowledge to have some sense of what might have been awaiting them there. The Temple officials were effectively the municipal government in Jerusalem. They were collaborators with the Roman military occupation imposed upon Judea. Jesus had already annoyed these religious authorities with his teachings about religious hypocrisy and stories that spoke out against brutal military oppression. Thus, the disciples had good reason to be concerned about what might be ahead if their worst fears were realized. They likely

thought or suspected or even imagined that after Jerusalem Jesus might no longer be traveling with them in the same way. He had even hinted at that. Without his encouragement and help, fulfilling the mission that they had already embraced could be difficult or even impossible. I think it is fair to say that they were anxious. With an idea about what might come, were they afraid of what might happen to them? Were they uncertain what that might mean for their mission? Did they feel a little guilty too because they might not actually live up to the high standard that Jesus had expected of them?

On this Sunday when the church calls everyone to think about truth and reconciliation and Canada's relationship with Canada's Indigenous Peoples, I know that many of us in the older "settler" generations fully understand that what went on in Canada at a point in history was criminal. Indeed, in so many respects, the racist actions of our colonial forebears were so absolutely shameful that when we encounter our Indigenous sisters and brothers, we experience guilt and anxiety. And when we're told that there are these 94 things to be done now to begin the process of reconciliation, guilt and anxiety are magnified by the sheer enormity of the task of bringing justice for hundreds of years of criminal abuse. Like those disciples in today's gospel reading, we are all anxious, a little fearful, uncertain about where to start, and guilty that it has taken so long to respond. And, at a certain age, the prospect of even any change can make us anxious.

While we cannot undo what our forebears did over past centuries, we can open our eyes to its continuing impact and attempt to redress the wrongs. Many of those impacts, like the gonging of a clock, are so embedded in this culture that they are largely unnoticed. The first step in the process of reconciliation is seeing the wrong. It seems to me this is why, on this Sunday when the Church calls us to think about reconciliation, the reading is from Lamentations and the response to it is Psalm 137.

One mourns about the destruction of a home by a foreign power and the other sings about the feelings of a people removed by King Nebuchadnezzar and into an exile where it became impossible to “sing the Lord's song in a foreign alien land.” Both speak about loss. These readings remind everyone how the peoples identified as First Nations, Inuit, and Métis might feel as living in a cultural and sometimes geographical exile on the very homelands that their ancestors occupied for thousands of years. It seems amazing to me that earlier generations of good church people once sang the very same hymn that we sang this morning at the beginning of this Eucharist. Praising God for the beauty of the earth and “for the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child” those very same people returned to the Parliament of Canada, or to government offices, or to schoolrooms, to suppress the language and culture of children who essentially had been kidnapped from their homes with brothers, sisters, and parents. And as we sang those same words today, we probably weren't aware of or even thinking about those abused and lost children of the past two centuries.

Over 50 years ago on the night I graduated in Arts from the University of Toronto at Trinity College there was a reception in the quadrangle where graduating students mingled some alumni at a reunion. There was one older gentleman whom I clearly recall – a priest who, like every good churchman knew how to work a crowd or a quad. He moved around and spoke to every new graduate. When he greeted me, asked my name, and told me his, he enquired what I was going to be doing next. At that point, I was actually on my way to Lakehead University in Port Arthur, one of the twin cities at the Lakehead of Lake Superior to study at the summer session of its new Education Faculty. He replied, “I'm the rector of a parish in Fort William. When you're up there, please come by and we'll help you feel more at home.” Then he added helpfully, “But I must warn you. Never go down to the Main Street in Port Arthur on a Saturday afternoon because that's when “Indians from the reservation” go to the pubs, get drunk,

pass out, and fall sleep on the street.” This hint shocked me enough to make an impression that I still remember a half century later.

To register at the university and check into residence as instructed by Saturday afternoon, I had left home in Toronto early on Friday. When I arrived in Port Arthur late Saturday afternoon, the signs directing me to the campus took right down the Main Street of Port Arthur. As was reported, there actually were individuals staggering and stumbling and sleeping on the street. Other people just passed by, doing their shopping, sometimes stepping over a person or a puddle of sick. I was shocked. I had never seen anything like that. I pushed on.

Once registered and assigned a room, I met my new roommate for that summer session. He was a young man from Sudbury with whom I am still in touch. He told me that there was an actual ‘Indian Reservation’ nearby and since we have some time before dinner, we decided to have a look. After driving to and through Fort William, we entered the lands of the First Nation of Fort William, now mostly Ojibway people -- “Mount McKay” to the local skiers who operated a ski lift, and “Thunder Mountain” in the Indigenous tongue.

What we saw on the roadway there was an eye-opening shock to a kid raised in Toronto. In a place where the weather gets seriously cold in fall and winter, I was instantly shocked to see the houses in which people lived. They were cobbled together with bits of wood, sometimes a Pepsi-Cola sign or another tin signs that you would see on the highway, and sometimes even just canvas and plywood. It was shocking to see that there were entire families living like that in those kinds of squalid conditions just a short distance from a reasonably large Canadian city. Driving a little further along that road, there was a magnificent modern brick church with beautiful stained-glass windows and a tower with no doubt a bell. Next to it was a rectory large enough to house at least four families. Now, you can relax – it wasn't Anglican. Nonetheless, it

was a shocking picture of our society's priorities and the place that the church took within them. The unfairness of that image still sticks with me today. Being just a kid, I didn't make the obvious connection between this scene and the one witnessed earlier on Port Arthur's Main Street.

For a few years after, I taught in the Sudbury area where I encountered and met many Indigenous students who struggled in an alien school community setting that catered mostly to the children of miners who lived in nearby "miner towns". Falconbridge Nickel or The International Nickel Company owned both the housing and the mines where most of the students' fathers worked. The Indigenous students came from more distant places. Some kids lived closer to North Bay and had to get up at 6:30 am to board a bus for the two-hour drive to school – the long ride back home at the end of the day ruled out participation on teams or in clubs. They endured this ordeal because our high school was the newest one and still "had room" that schools nearer to their homes supposedly lacked. Such discrimination was rampant.

I can remember one snowy February night leaving the school around 9 pm after a rehearsal for the school musical. Leaving, I saw one young lad standing on the side of the highway beside the school. He was part of the pit band and was hitchhiking. I pulled over and asked him where he was going. He said, "Down to Highway 17 in Sudbury."

That was near where I was living, and I offered him a ride. When we got there down there I asked, "Where do you go from here?"

"Just as far as Wahnapiatae. There's usually lots of rides. It's only 7 miles."

With the dark and the cold and the snow, seven miles seemed like a long way. I told him I would drive him there. We turned east and drove for ten minutes or so. At a sideroad, he said, "This is where I catch the bus. You can drop me here. I always walk the rest of the way."

“How much further do you have to go?” I asked.

“About a mile down the road,” he replied.

“That’s not far. I’ll drive you.”

When we got there, he said, “Thank you for the ride. Now you must come in to meet my mother. My mother would be insulted if you didn’t.”

So I went for my first time ever into the home of what was clearly an Indigenous family. The lad’s mother was effusive in her thanks because she was worried about her son hitchhiking on such a night. When I returned to my car and made my way home I thought about that home. Despite the dirt floor, it was warm and inviting. What had initially surprised me was that the family lived in one end of the space and at the other far end they kept their few farm animals. My appreciation grew for my younger passenger’s determination to participate, and to contribute despite the hurdles of distance and culture.

As time passed, I learned more about the students who travelled by bus from reservations in the area. For the first time, I also learned that there many individuals with an Indigenous heritage who struggle to survive because their family connections mean that they do not qualify for a “status card”. That means that they are denied some tax breaks and government supports that offer educational and other opportunities.

Some years later, I went back to Northern Ontario for three months that lasted six years to look after a conflicted parish on the outskirts of North Bay. There, I used my one day off each week to visit the North Bay Jail – a correctional holding centre for people who had business before the courts whether they just been arrested and were waiting for hearing a trial, or an appeal a regional centre where the courthouse. The jail was an awful 19th century solid building that housed 100 men and 20 women. On that one day each week, appointments had been for people who had asked to see a

Chaplain. Given the huge distances in the catchment area, the only regular outsiders in that jail were me and a Roman Catholic Deacon. On separate days, we would meet residents in a large cell used for video court. It was once probably used for solitary confinement because it was the only cell on a hallway that was blocked from the rest of the jail by a heavy sound-proof door that when locked isolated that room from sound from the outside world. I remember one day turning up there and being told by the Correctional Officer, "This one's going to be interesting and difficult for you."

I went down the hall with the officer and I went into the room and sat down on a chair on one side of the only table. On the other side, an obviously Indigenous man of about fifty sat chanting, or singing – not using words only sounds. As the officer locked the door, he said to me, "He doesn't talk ever. Just makes those noises." That suggested the man was probably a regular guest.

"How can I help you?" I asked. The man continued chanting or singing the whole time. My only option was simply to sit there and wait.

After about twenty minutes he finally spoke, "You're not 'gonna give up are you."

I said, "No," and then "What can I do for you?"

It is inappropriate in that setting for a visitor to ask, "Why are you here?" or "What did you do?" or anything about the resident's status or progress within the legal system. That is their private business.

After a short silence, he said, " It's cold and they won't let me into the shelter here. So I go into a restaurant and order a meal. Around halfway through it, I leave for the washroom. Then I have to wait till somebody else comes in. Then I turn on the basin tap full and put my hand on the bottom of the spout and just spray him all over with water. Then, the restaurant calls the police who drag me out and I had a free meal. And

when I get here, it's warm for 30 days.” That was the whole life of this Indigenous person who obviously could speak well but usually chose not to.

During my time, an Indigenous family – mother, father, and two boys – moved into an empty house across the road from the Rectory. Mom was a lawyer back west. Here the time, the money, and daily childcare prevented her from obtaining an Ontario law licence. Dad was an incredibly gifted artist whose beautiful paintings were stacked in almost every room of the house. He sold a few at weekend flea markets, He lacked the financial means and local connections to sell them through a gallery. Their landlord, who also worked for the municipality, secured work for him driving the snowplough in winter and mowing the roadside grass in summer. Mom and the two boys attended church regularly. The eldest became an altar boy. The younger boy, about 7 years old, was non-verbal and diagnosed then as “autistic”. One day, Mom asked me about baptising the younger boy. Given their regular churchgoing, I was surprised that he was not already baptised. She told me that the priest out west had told her he couldn't baptize the boy because he probably would not understand what was happening or be able to make the promises. I thought about all the babies who don't understand what they're going through when they are baptized. The boy was baptised two weeks later with parents and several godparent sponsors from the parish.

Some of these seemingly small things that have happened to many Indigenous persons in our culture in my own limited experience are just like that clock I can only hear when I intentionally listen for it. There are all kinds of things that some people don't really see and don't understand when driving into a village with a sign that says, “Settled 1820”. How might that sign feel if your ancestors were on that land thousands of years ago? There are many such ‘somethings’ in Canadian culture that might even make someone feel a little like an exile in a foreign land. As we celebrate truth and reconciliation and the 94 Calls to Action, Canada and indeed the whole world should

profess the urgent need first to start seeing to start hearing the 'gongs' in our way of life. In church, we can start by looking at the words of the hymns we sing and understand that maybe, just maybe, when we sing that every person, made in God's image, has value, we also see that for some that may not be their experience of the church. Praying for that aspirational goal in song is essential. But only singing it without the witness of action that actually shows it is not helpful.

When we sing that every person made in God's image has value, that includes everybody – even the people who for one reason or another have been sidelined through no fault or action of their own other than their birth. I think Canadians sometimes work with the kind of satisfied arrogance at the racial strife in the United States, and might wag a finger, or cluck a tongue at that kind of systemic prejudice – forgetting that that's also part of our own culture. Many who live in this part of Ontario don't very often even recognize an Indigenous person in an encounter. But our Indigenous sisters and brothers are here. In my previous parish up in the Orangeville area, until we began to share our facilities with the members of the Indigenous Circle, had no idea that almost 30% of students in high schools had some Indigenous ancestry. Settlers and Indigenous persons sometimes married in the so-called Pioneer Day. I encourage each of us as we go through this week, as we sing our hymns and offer praises to God, as we go about our daily rounds, to remember that there are folks of every ancestry, ethnicity, colour, gender, and orientation, who are expressions of God's image in the world and this part of Ontario. They all deserve support. Most of all, they simply need every one of us to see, to hear, and to acknowledge what they have experienced and how that might make them feel like being a kind of exile here at home. Amen.

