

[Preached at the Great Chapter Meeting of the James Bay Deanery: St. Barnabas' Church, Waswanipi, QC -- Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, 20 February 2011]

Let us pray

O God, by whose blessed Spirit the whole body of Thine elect people is inhabited and built up to an holy temple in the Lord, preserve us, we beseech Thee, in the grace of sanctification, that being wholly renewed in the temper of our minds, and having fervent charity among ourselves, we may attain to the perfection of Thy saints, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ONE TOOLS FOR THE JOURNEY

I got a report from the North-Western shore of Lake Superior a few weeks ago. The lights had gone out at Moose Factory. Perhaps I should check. I marvel at how small this world has become!

Another thought.... Back a generation or so there were no lights. There WERE conveniences. Some had come from afar. Gradually some of those conveniences turned into 'necessities'. (Like: Was there really life before Cheez-Whiz?) But there was a time -- and not that long ago -- when folks lived in the Bush and only the Bush. Everything they used came from the Bush. They survived because they developed tools of the mind:

- ◆Values that kept the family strong
- ◆Flexibility and creativity... They could make a canoe from a tree or an axe from a rock.
- ◆They had hope and patience and could wait for freeze-up or for break-up or for a better day.
- ◆They honed the instincts of the hunter.
- ◆They knew how to make a life in a harsh environment and how to be happy with each other.

...Most of the time.

This is an incredible inheritance. It may well be why several of us are here. I'm here, in part, out of my respect for those people. I don't know how they did what they did. But I have seen the results. Others of us may be here, because our ancestors survived or because we survived thanks to their teachings.

Little Joe, of Moose Factory, told me a story. It's about The Bay and -- maybe -- his grandfather and his great-grandfather -- a few generations back.

Father and Son were out walking on the ice on a lovely spring day. Father then noticed that the ice they were walking on had separated from the ice attached to the mainland. Without comment or delay, Father took off his waterproof sealskin outfit, tied the ends of the arms and the legs, and made one great balloon, which he filled with the air from his lungs. He tied this improvised float somehow to the boy -- who was small -- and ordered him to swim to shore. Son, of course, objected. Father did what Fathers sometimes do. He ORDERED Son to swim. NOW! The boy obeyed. And survived. Father was never seen again.

The argument of my conversation with you today is that these intangibles, of which we speak, enlighten the road ahead, that our survival depends upon them, that we have only to look within ourselves to find them and use them. And there may not be much else that we really need.

Our Scripture Readings this morning are all familiar. We know them well. In Leviticus: *"You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."* And then: *"...you shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

Then, in Matthew, in case we thought the forgoing was just a thought: *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

TWO
CHURCH -- We are many Churches
There is one KINGDOM OF GOD

We often think of Church as a Building or an Organization. And there are many of these Buildings and Congregations, of course. But, Christ's Church is ONE. It is His Fellowship. It has no divisions.

While our particular parish, or diocese, or communion may be the best we can do for now, it can only be in anticipation of this one Church or Fellowship which is Christ's and which He called the Kingdom of God. That's where we're headed. We hope.

We may think of our own home Church as of one piece, but there are several kinds of groups even in our own Congregations. There's nothing wrong with that. It's all how we organize our lives as human beings.

There are different Families involved. Rich people and poor people. Working people and retired people. Lots of kids. There are those folks that show up at all the Holy Week Services, and some who show up once every five to ten years.

Some of us have known ourselves to be Anglicans all our lives. Some have moved in from other faiths. Some are moving in and moving out. (Some like the Minister, so they are moving in. Others can't stand the Minister so they are moving out.)

So, even though it might seem that one parish is one group of people, easily accounted for, we are a swirl of people, always in motion, always changing, always on some kind of journey.

So, how do I put words around this thing we call Church?

We are that group of people, called into being, called to be here, by the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ. And that's all there is to it, actually. In other words, we don't need all those other things to be Church. WE are Church because of Jesus -- and only because of Jesus -- according to the Will of God..

Everything else may be helpful -- really helpful -- as we go about doing the things we are called to do. But, if you take those things out of the mix, you still have Church. Take Jesus out of the mix, and there's no Church.

That may not be much of an issue for any of us here. But I suspect, for many, many of our people, it is an issue. And, I think that a lot of that has to do with the simple fact that very few folks have been introduced to Jesus in a way they could ever understand.

Even more tragic is the way Jesus is viewed by many people outside the Church. They see Jesus as basically front-man for the Missionaries whose avowed purpose was the dismantling of Native religion and culture. In that enterprise, then, Jesus is just another of the white man's gods. And the sooner they're all gone, the better for everybody.

You and I, like every generation, are faced with the frailties and failures of the past. Those failures shape our present ministry, give substance to our prayers, and challenge our discipleship.

THREE -- CULTURE

We are many Cultures

There is One Mind of Christ -- One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism

One Household of God

If we get really close to the people we're looking at, we'll see that even an extended family may have varying behaviors, customs, values, -- all in the same family but in different parts of that family. (I lead a life, for instance, that's very different from the lives lived by any of my siblings or first cousins.)

If we look at all the families in this region, we won't see those little groups in detail, but I think we'll see two loosely defined cultures by which we can identify -- loosely -- two groups. Here is both challenge and opportunity to us who proclaim The Gospel.

One of these cultures is Cree -- of which I spoke at the beginning of this conversation. Because I am not Cree -- and cannot even speak Cree -- I am not competent to speak of this culture, except for what I have seen from my own perspective. While my witness may -- or may not -- be useful, it can in no way be offered or understood as descriptive of the Cree Culture or Cree People.

The other culture, whatever our feelings about it, is one we all know of in some way, because we deal with it every single day of our lives. It is huge. It is getting bigger all the time. It already has encircled the globe, and as we speak, it is reaching into those small pockets where people have only just begun to hear of it or to see it. While I consider myself to be of the culture of the Northeastern United States, I also consider myself a member of this larger global community. I do not see any significant conflicts between my more local culture and this more global culture. And I don't worry about it -- beyond a certain point. I DO worry about my culture when I consider that even without its aggressive tendencies,

this global culture, that I belong to, is internally dysfunctional. It will perish. That is, the seeds of its own destruction are visible. We're looking at an enormous bubble. It's getting bigger all the time. It will break. When it does break, the consequences will be calamitous -- for all of us.

But no culture is perfect. No culture is forever. Because cultures come and go, we are better off living in a diversity of cultures. If we are pragmatic, then, we may the more easily -- and perhaps the more effectively -- pick those best options that will enable us to go forward -- perhaps, even, survive.

I remember a conversation I had some years ago with Lawrence Cheechoo in Moose Factory. Lawrence felt that the greatest of all the gifts in the younger generation's inheritance from their Elders was this gift of pragmatism. While he was talking, I remember being mildly surprised by his point of view, and I challenged him. Lawrence said, "They will survive, as Cree, because they're going to LEARN. They will learn how to adapt. It's in their blood."

Little Joe's great-grandfather, a North American Native, Inuit, was, shall we say, pragmatic.

IF the Cree culture -- and, indeed many other aboriginal cultures -- CAN survive in some form, there will then be that frame of reference in which their heirs can live and move and have their being. That will be a life-giving resource to others, who will have lost their culture -- if they have not also already lost their lives. Remember, it's in our diversity that we survive and even flourish. If one of us is in danger, we all are in danger. If one of us does well, we all do well. As the world gets smaller, this reality becomes all the more obvious.

FOUR -- CONVERSION, THE CROSS, AND THE TABLE

The Church doesn't belong to any one culture. It doesn't do itself any good -- and doesn't do anybody else any good -- when it affiliates itself with any one culture, to the exclusion of other cultures.

Having said that, we all know, full well, that we come from various cultures. As an American, I have my roots in the Puritan Experiment in Massachusetts and the American Revolution. When the American Colonies became the United States, the Anglicans in the new USA re-invented the Anglican Church in their part of North America.

Not surprisingly, then, I really like the inclusion of Cree culture in the Church here in the North -- in its worship, language, and governance. It means that the Children of God in this land can understand themselves and proclaim Christ's Good News all the better without having to borrow from another culture. It also means that I, as one from afar, can inquire more deeply into who I am as a human being and how God might be calling me, as I listen to the Story from another culture -- and one I deeply respect.

Our many languages and cultures, of course, are a great challenge to us Anglicans. They also are part of our priceless heritage. We have learned, often the hard way, a little bit of patience and wisdom in matters of culture and diversity.

That is, Church is not born of any particular Culture. It may be born in a Culture, but it is not born simply OF that culture. AND -- and this is the trick... -- , if the Church is not inclusive of ALL cultures, it

is not Church. We are a multiplicity of Cultures, just as we are a multiplicity of races and tongues. We celebrate this on the Day of Pentecost. If we forget that, or ignore that, we become a rather exclusive little culture club -- that, like all other little clubs, comes and goes and then is forgotten. The Anglican Communion is not perfect in any sense. But it IS a step along the way.

Along the way we met Jesus. Or, we are continuing to meet Jesus. Or, more to the point, our eyes were opened and we saw Jesus: Who always has been around, even if we didn't happen to notice, or didn't really care.

AND, at least for myself, I have to say, that meeting occurred at the foot of His Cross. I don't know who I am until I know who He is. And I don't know who He is until I have prayed in the shadow of His Cross. Now, that's me. It may not be you. But, however it happens, when we meet Jesus, things change. Maybe it's all in my head. But my story is different.

Those stories in Scripture of His Resurrection become my own story. His Story is born in each one of us. Those Stories are what we have in common. They keep us going. We tell the Story -- and we are part of it as we go along.

FIVE -- PROCLAIMING CHRIST IN A WORLD WITHOUT EARS

Whatever shall we do?

I....] -- Our Story, the Story of Jesus.

I talked about Story. What's missing in the Story we proclaim is the Cree part of the Story. That needs to be remedied. How else do you help people come to Christ, if you don't tell the Story -- that is also your Story? -- and you don't tell it in terms they can understand?

Some day, perhaps, that Narrative will be neither white nor Cree -- but the story of God's People transformed by the love of Christ. As the hymn goes:

In Christ there is no East or West,
In Him no South or North;
But one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth.

That may still be a dream. But when the dream comes true, we know that we have come upon the Kingdom of God, indeed.

II....] -- Love one another as I have loved you.

How we deal with each other suggests how far into Christ we have grown -- or, how far we have allowed Christ to grow in us. It isn't what we say that is so important. It's what we do. If we cannot love one another, we really don't have much to say. If we DO love one another, not much else need be said. Really.

III....] -- Inclusion. Inclusion. Inclusion

We have to figure out how to include all those people that keep showing up in Church. We have to figure it out and we have to do it.

I'm thinking especially of the folks we see at Baptisms, at Weddings, and at Funerals -- that more peripheral part of our Congregations.

Yes, they are the Church, just as we are the Church. They have been sent to us by Christ.

Remember, when we were hospitable, it was the angels we welcomed though we never realized it. And when we closed the door in someone's face, it was Jesus we left standing out there in the cold.

IV....] -- "...And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee....." (BCP1928/usa/p 81)

Some time ago, a long time ago, some Christians realized that they were not accomplishing very much by murdering each other when they disagreed with each other -- which was often.

A lot of this happened in England, and we are the beneficiaries of that hard-earned learning. (There is absolutely nothing worse than a religious war. Everybody is virtuously correct. Most of the people slaughtered have had nothing to do with the fight in the first place. And the war goes on for generations.)

We Anglicans have another incredible gift to offer. It's the voice of Reason. Amongst all the communities of faith, we may not be unique, but our own experience has given us a great respect for that Voice of Reason. We listen to it. And when we speak from it, although we may never be thanked -- in this life, anyway -- we are helpful to those around us, even if they never listened and never heard a thing.

V....] -- Is it I Lord?

- He never said it would be easy. We wouldn't be meeting, here and now, if it were.
- He said that our Discipleship is all-or-nothing. It's my choice. And yours.
- He said that He is with us -- in our life and in our death -- and forever.
- What do we need for all of this? ... It's all pretty much in our heads already. All we have to do is use those gifts. And, if I can't carry it on my back, I probably don't need it, anyway.

AND, WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

A German Lutheran Pastor who died, at the hands of the Nazis, three years after I was born -- once said:

"The church is the hidden Christ among us."

May we seek and find. May we allow ourselves to be found. And may we follow.

Let us pray

O God, by whose blessed Spirit the whole body of Thine elect people is inhabited and built up to an holy temple in the Lord, preserve us, we beseech Thee, in the grace of sanctification, that being wholly renewed in the temper of our minds, and having fervent charity among ourselves, we may attain to the perfection of Thy saints, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.