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Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist 3 September 2023

Very Rev Canon Dr Martin Brokenleg OBSCn

Sermon begins 36:49

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r29UPBFI4Ps>

[36:49] In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Symbols are powerful things. Our whole liturgy is full of symbols from one end to the other, and some of them can be highly regulated because of their significance. For example, the community I come from, the Sioux Nation, is out on the prairies. You would have seen many of my relatives if you saw two now old films, one called Dances With Wolves, and the other called Thunderheart. They were both filmed the same year, on one end or the other of my reservation, in what's now South Dakota. In my nation we don't have the notion of button blankets, like the people on the BC Coast have; however, I was adopted among the Haida into the Raven house, and so I have the Raven on the back of my button [38:00] blanket, and if I were to go to one of the pot latches in the Haida community, I would enter the feast hall backwards, so your crest is seen first. The four major crests are very highly regulated: they are Eagle and Raven, Killer Whale and Wolf. Every community has at least those four, and you inherit it from your mother because BC coastal communities are matrilineal and matriarchal, and so you inherit the crest of your mother. In my case, I was adopted by a woman, and so I inherited her crest. These crests are taken so seriously – this is a fact I didn't know - if I were to wear the wrong crest in public, I was liable to execution, because it's considered a very important dynamic to wear the right crests and to present those positive symbols in the world.

Well, what's the major symbol for Christians? So for now, it's the cross; it wasn't always the case. For Christians for the [39:03] first thousand years, the major item that signified heaven was a field, a field with blossoming trees, flowering trees,, on it animals laying side by side that you wouldn't expect, like lions and lambs. Go to Ravenna and look at the mosaics in the churches there, and that's what you will see as a portrayal of heaven: Heaven is nature, a powerful place, a field with, as I say, blossoms, flowing waters, lambs and lions laying down together. But then in the Middle Ages, particularly after the Black Death in Europe, that symbol changed and became the cross, and became the crucifix, and probably that is now the major symbol for Christians of our faith, the “sign of our faith”. In fact we say that in certain settings, “Let us begin with the sign of our faith, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” you say. The cross is the sign of our faith. And as I say, this wasn't always the case,, but in particular it's the crucifix that for the longest period of time was the major sign of Christianity.

Now, as you know, we live in a very secular world, especially in BC, especially in Victoria. You will hear Bishop Anna say this is the most secular place in Canada, in Victoria. So I say again, congratulations for being at church, on a long weekend! It's kind of an unusual thing in Victoria. So we have this sign of the cross, and it is, as I say, the the sign of our faith, even in a place such as this: we make a sign of the cross on the infants’ foreheads when we baptize them; we make the sign of the cross with our thumb when we hear the gospel, so it would be embedded in our mind, and on our lips, and in our heart, a custom by many people; we bless ourselves; parents ought to bless their own children; our spouses have the right to bless one [41:04] another. We have all of these, but it was primarily the crucifix.

But you can tell how secular a world we are in: a friend of mine went down to buy a little cross for his daughter, for some birthday occasion or something like that, just the little cross that she could wear on a chain around her neck. And the nice clerk asks, “Do you want the one with the little man on it?” She apparently didn't know that the word was crucifix. So he did buy the one with a little man. In fact, I had my prior’s cross, which is one of the Greek crosses; they look like a plus sign. I was in a bank, and the nice 20-something teller said, “What is that thing that you have around your neck called?” and I said, “It's called a cross.” “Oh,” he said, “It's very nice.” And we went on with our business transactions.

So the cross ought to be the major sign of the faith of a Christian, and this comes from today's [42:01] Gospel. In fact in the gospel of Matthew there are four places where Jesus forecasts his death: he says, “I'm going to go to Jerusalem to die.” This one that we read today is the very first time Jesus forecast his death, but he says *must*, "I must go to Jerusalem to die.” The others he doesn't say he must; he just said that he's going to. But this one he says he must: “I must go to Jerusalem to die.” And in jumps Peter - don't you just love Saint Peter, ADHD Peter? He's my ADHD hero. He's always excessive, he's always at the front, he's always a little bit over the top, and good, you got to bless the ADHD people, because they bring joy and power into our lives. And Peter does so: he says to Jesus, “That will never happen to you!” And this is so antithetical to what Jesus knows is going to happen that he says, “Get behind me, Satan,” he says. It’s as though this is even a statement [43:03] of evil. So what is this saying? Jesus knows what's going to happen to him because he's going to speak truth against the kingdom, against the enemy, against the empire. You speak truth against the government, you're going to get in trouble. At the very least you'll be socially ostracized; you may be fired; you might be shunned by your neighbours, and by family and acquaintances if you speak truth to power. We see that happen over and over in various places in the world, and so we should never take lightly these admonitions in our Gospel teaching, and in the writings of Saint Paul, that tell us to strive for justice. This is no small thing. Some people water down our faith, and they think taking up your cross means putting up with annoyances: [44:04] when your spouse thinks he's right, for example, or that driver ahead of you on the street - and of course that is taking up your cross, if you tolerate that, because that's included, but that isn't all that is included.

What is forecast for Christians who take up the cross is death. If you criticize, if you work for justice, if you love peace, death is likely; death is probable, and Jesus knows that. And so this is why he says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan.” He is so certain of what is about to happen to him. Now hold on to that point, because I want to bring another piece into it.

I'm a psychologist. My own children will tell you, the fate worse than death is to be the child of the psychologist. My son [45:00], who is now 50, was eight years old when he stood in front of me one day and he said, “You're experimenting on me!” It was true, I was - I learned a lot on that kid - but I made my amends to him some years later. Well, my psychology practice was general. Over the last 30 years I focused on youth: how is it that we keep youth strong? How is it that we keep youth out of trouble? and of course these last 20 years that I have come to live in Canada and BC and make it my home, I have focused in particular on trauma, the trauma which plagues Indigenous people because of what happened during that residential school era, and the remnants of that that come down to our own time. See, human beings are designed to get over occasional trauma, a trauma that isn't so serious, one that might happen two or three or maybe four times in a lifespan - but no one gets over big trauma. If you have been sexually assaulted, for example, you will probably never get over it in your life. You will learn to live with it [46:03]; you will be stronger because of it, eventually, but you will never get over it.

So also those who went to residential school: when they came out, they didn't know how to be parents, they didn't know how to be spouses, they were heavily scrutinized. As it was, many lost their children; there are more children in foster care in Canada now, three times the number of Indigenous children who ever went away to residential school. But that's the case with trauma: intergenerational trauma increases with each generation that doesn't do its healing work. Well, so I focus on trauma. Like I say, we are each designed to get over small bits of trauma, but none of us get over serious trauma, and we do not get over trauma that is constant: sexism, racism, ageism. We'll probably never get over those kinds of traumas, because they're always around us, and of course it's the institutional form that is the most serious. The institutional forms of sexism and racism don't depend on the good will of [47:01] the person who is exhibiting it; it's in the process, it's in the procedures, it's in the policies and the practices. That's where racism exists, or sexism exists, and so that trauma is never mitigated.

Now of course for people to recover from trauma, it requires listening, requires a safe person who accompanies you to make you feel strong. It eventually will allow expression, there is healing that can occur from trauma - but it's a long process, and it is very difficult. As I say, these last 20 years now I have focused particularly on it; I've done some workshops with Gabor Mate, a sometimes controversial person who specializes in trauma, coming over from Vancouver. Now, so who are the best people to accompany those who are trying to heal from trauma, such as Indigenous people? Who are the best people? Christians. Christians - and why is that? It's because unlike all other religions, Christianity is based on trauma. [48:02] The criticism, the suppression of Jesus, the torture and suffering of Jesus - what's the Mel Gibson slasher film called? I forget the name. If you've seen that, you see a depiction of physical brutality – well, that's trauma, that’s trauma-inducing. You want to see what that does to people, read the story about those who accompany the one who they eventually figure out is Jesus, on their way to Emmaus. They don’t even recognize him - but that's what happens to trauma people. If you have been heavily traumatized, your whole world perspective starts to shift in ways that you did not anticipate. So what Christians proclaim, what you have been proclaiming all morning, is that you celebrate trauma. The Cross isn't a nice piece of jewelry; it's like putting a hangman's noose around your neck, [49:00] or it's like wearing a disembowelling hook, because of the punishments used in England. It's like wearing an electric chair around your neck as a piece of jewelry. Christianity is based in trauma - and at the very bottom of all of that trauma is the grace and power of a new life, the grace and power of resurrection, which is of course needed not just by Indigenous people, but in fact every person. We all need that new life, and those who are Christians, who have actually taken up their cross, who have taken on that understanding of trauma, are the people who can best accompany and best support others as they are trying to find their own way and recover from their own forms of trauma.

So this is no little thing when Jesus says, “If you're going to be my follower, pick up your cross and follow me.” Of course, don't annoy the [50:01] driver in front of you; of course let your husband think he's occasionally correct; do all of that – but remember what we're really saying when we say that we have taken on the cross: we have taken on the threat and possibility of death. In a few moments, you're going to do something that Christians have done for all of these centuries: we're going to pray, we're going to gather at the table, we're going to take bread and wine. Fortunately today in Canada this isn't under the threat of death, but for most of the church's history, you would have been under the threat of death if you came to pray and to eat bread and drink wine. You would have been under threat of death. So we should know all about trauma - and we do, we Christians, as we think about it, it’s just that we probably have not used that term of trauma to think about our work and our duty and the gifts which we can bring to many places in the world. We rejoice and commune with God on this day, in the name of the Father and [51:00] of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.