

Jesus is our joy

Following is the text of Archbishop Fred Hiltz's New Year's Day address delivered at Christ Church Cathedral in Ottawa. It is a tradition that the Canadian Primate preaches at the cathedral of Canada's capital on January 1.

Archbishop Fred J. Hiltz, Primate

Every year I look forward to this Eucharist and to the levee that follows it. I want to thank your bishop for his kind invitation to preach, to thank your dean, the cathedral clergy, the choristers and all others who enable us to enter the New Year in the glory of Christmas song and the grace of this wondrous sacrament.

Lynne and I travel here by train and arrive early on New Year's Eve. We enjoy a quiet dinner and then a walk to the Hill to see the Houses of Parliament floodlit for the holidays. We pause at the Centennial Flame kindled on New Year's Day, 1967. Then we climb the steps to the Peace Tower. Completed in 1926, it houses the Memorial Chamber in which the names of all Canadians who have died in war are recorded in the Books of Remembrance. High above this chamber is the great carillon of 53 bells, the largest one bearing this inscription, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will to men." (Luke 2:14), the song of the angels announcing the birth of the Christ child.

I come to this New Year's celebration having read a daily reflection through Advent and Christmas by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the Church's most beloved theologians. He was imprisoned for his criticism of the Nazi regime in Germany and hung by order of one of Hitler's final execution decrees in April, 1945. He was just 39 years old. Though his life was short, his legacy as a devoted Christian lives on in the papers he delivered, the entries he made in his diary and in his letters from prison.

Writing to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, on December 13, 1943, he said, "Be brave for my sake, dearest Maria, even if this letter is your only token of my love this Christmas-tide. ... God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment."

Bonhoeffer described the birth of the Christ Child as "the greatest turning point in history." "Everything past and everything future is accomplished here ... the infinite mercy of the almighty God comes to us in the form of a child."

How, he wondered, shall we deal with such a child? Have our hands, soiled with daily toil become too hard and too proud to fold in prayer at the sight of this child? Has our head become too full of serious thoughts ... that we cannot bow our head in humility at the wonder of this child? Can we not forget all our stresses and struggles, our sense of importance, and for once worship the child, as did the shepherds and the wise men from the East? ... Come and kneel down before this child of poor people and repeat in faith the stammering words of the prophet “Wonderful Counselor mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

So it is that we come to the naming of Jesus and all the way along our song is this, “Joy to the World.” Written by Isaac Watts the carol has brightened Christmas for some 300 years. The first two verses call us to remember and rejoice. They call us, each and every one, to prepare room in our lives for him who comes as our Saviour. Every voice under heaven and earth is called to repeat the sounding joy of his reign of love. The other two verses speak of Christ coming “to make his blessings flow as far as our sin is found.” They remind us of Paul’s teaching that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). These verses hold before us a vision of the world ruled by the Lord’s “truth and grace” The nations are at peace and all people know the “wonders of his love” and “the glories of his righteousness.”

Reflecting on that carol, Bonhoeffer wrote, “Anyone for whom its sound is foreign, or who hears in it nothing but weak enthusiasm, has not yet really heard the gospel. For the sake of humankind, Jesus Christ became a human being in a stable in Bethlehem: Rejoice, O Christendom! For sinners, Jesus Christ became a companion of tax collectors and prostitutes: Rejoice, O Christendom! ... For the condemned Christ was condemned to the Cross on Golgotha: Rejoice O Christendom! For all of us, Jesus Christ was reconnected to life: Rejoice O Christendom. All over the world today people are asking: Where is the path to joy? The church of Christ answers loudly: “Jesus is our Joy.”

In those beautiful words with which the carol ends -- “the glories of his righteousness and the wonders of his love,” I see the essence of our witness as Christians in the world. It is a composite of beauty in worship, compassion in service and steadfastness in advocacy for justice and peace among all people. “The wonders of his love” in the manger and at the Jordan, in Galilee and in Jerusalem, in the Upper Room and on the cross are celebrated in the liturgy His care of the poor, the sick and the lonely is reflected in our effort to abide by the teaching of St. Chrysostom who said “In the first

sense the body of Christ does not need clothing but only worship from a pure heart” but “in the second it does need clothing and all the care we can give it.”

In my travels throughout our beloved Church I am overjoyed by the commitment of our people to provide food and to serve at soups kitchens, to give children a good breakfast before they go to school, to provide a haven from the cold of winter and the heat of summer and to turn church crypts and parish halls into safe places for people to sleep. Every night this Church of ours cares for thousands of men and women and children. It is a ministry that is absolutely integral to a faithful witness to Jesus Christ. It is what Bishop Michael Ingham calls “sensitive evangelism. It is diaconal rather than imperial. It is designed for service not conquest. It seeks to show forth the Lord Jesus in acts of compassion rather than to win souls deemed otherwise to be lost.”

Diakonia, the servant ministry of the Church finds expression not only in unconditional love to the neighbor in need, but also in endeavoring to address the root causes of poverty. It seeks to bring about radical change. The fullness of diakonia reflects our Communion-wide Marks of Mission to respond to human need by loving service and to seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind, and to pursue peace and reconciliation. Through abiding commitments to diakonia, “the wonders of the Lord’s love” and “the glories of his righteousness” are made known.

I have seen such commitment in large urban congregations. I have seen it in small rural congregations and in tiny congregations in some of the most remote and isolated places in this vast country. I think especially of those congregations in the far-flung dioceses of the Council of the North. I recall this past year’s gathering of the clericus in the Diocese of Moosonee. It is a five-day gathering hosted by the Bishop – an opportunity for the clergy to come together to rest, to be refreshed and renewed. “They desperately need this time to enjoy one another’s company,” says Bishop Tom Corston, “to celebrate their vocations and to share their experiences of ministry.” The closing Eucharist is an emotional time as many of these clergy will not see one another for a whole year. These dear servants of God live so sacrificially. Their hearts are so firmly fixed on Christ and serving the people among whom they minister in his holy name. I ask your prayers for them, for their families and all whom they serve.

I think also of those men and women, ordained and lay serving among indigenous peoples who are living in the downtown core of many of our large cities in the south of Canada. Many are living in conditions of extreme poverty and in horrible cycles of addiction. I think of faithful pastors

like the Rev. Andrew Wesley working in downtown Toronto, the Rev. Dale Gillman in downtown Regina, the Rev. Barbara Shoomski in downtown Winnipeg. The ministries of these dedicated servants of God may not make the headlines of our papers, but by day and by night they are faithfully holding the Christ light for so many who are sitting in darkness and in the shadows of death. They are making known, “the wonders of the Lord’s love” and “the glories of his righteousness.”

Love and right relations, one with another -- that is the real work of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I am proud of our Church’s unwavering commitment to support the work of the commissioners, and the regional gatherings and national events they are hosting. Justice Sinclair has challenged all of us – all the parties to the Settlement Agreement, the Churches, the Government, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) -- to consider the question “What is reconciliation? What is its nature? How do we know when it is beginning to emerge? What does it look like when it has been achieved? How have we been changed through the journey?”

Rooted in the tradition of the prophets and the gospel of Jesus, the churches have something to say about reconciliation, the sincerity of apology and the patience to wait for acceptance. We look to a new day when racism is a thing of the past and when relations between the First Nations of this land and all others who call it home are marked by respect.

Many of us have been following news about Chief Theresa Spence of Attawapiskat. She is on a fast as she awaits a favorable response to her request for a meeting with the Prime Minister and Governor General and the leadership of the AFN to address the long-standing crisis associated with housing, health care and education in many Indigenous communities across Canada. Yesterday our Church sent a letter to the Prime Minister pleading that he meet with Chief Spence. We believe the consultation she calls for is entirely in keeping with Canada’s endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the call in the interim report of the TRC for renewed relations between the Government of Canada and Indigenous people. We believe Chief Spence’s request is “righteous” and it is rooted in right relations and we ask the Prime Minister “to provide the leadership of grace and vision that will bring us all forward together.”

“The wonders of his love” and “the glories of his righteousness” are at the heart of the Primate’s World Relief and Development Fund. They are also at the heart of Communion-wide networks dedicated to family life, health care and the environment. “The wonders of his love” and “the glories of his righteousness” are at the heart of the church’s efforts to confront bullying, to

address gender-based violence, to stop the trafficking of men and women and children for the sex trade. “The wonders of his love” and “the glories of his righteousness” are at the heart of the church’s prayers for Christians who are being persecuted in Nigeria and for Anglicans who are being harassed in Zimbabwe. They are at the heart of our prayers for peace for the people of Syria, Sudan and South Sudan, the D.R. Congo and Gaza.

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem,” wrote the Psalmist. As we remember the Church’s witness in Bethlehem, in the Holy City, throughout the Middle East, I rejoice in the Companion Relationship this diocese of Ottawa has with Jerusalem. I know your bishop was warmly welcomed as he addressed Synod at St. George’s Cathedral last fall and I know Bishop Suheil is looking forward to his visit here later this year. I give thanks that at this time a Canadian priest is serving as chaplain to Bishop Suheil. Supported by the General Synod for a three-year term, the Rev. Canon John Organ brings a wealth of experience in Anglican ministry and in inter-faith relations. He has become a strong advocate for the ministry priorities of the diocese of Jerusalem – hospitality, health care, education and reconciliation. I am confident that John’s capacity to tell the story of the Church’s witness in the Holy Land will be a great asset in helping grow the newly constituted body known as the Canadian Companions of the Diocese of Jerusalem.

“The wonders of his love” and “the glories of his righteousness” are at the heart of our life together across the Anglican Communion. As last year’s meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council reminded us yet again, relationships are important to us. We speak of the bonds of affection we share in the work of the gospel. “What we aspire to” writes the Archbishop of Canterbury “is not to be a federation of loosely connected and rather distant relatives who sometimes send Christmas cards to each other, but a true family and fellowship in which we share our hopes and know that we are responsible for each other’s well being and integrity before God.” As Archbishop Williams leaves the office of Archbishop of Canterbury, he speaks of “a great sense of thanksgiving and celebration for the many moments when the hidden Christ has shown his face for an instant in the holiness, the common witness, the service or the suffering of faithful Anglicans in so many places.” He reminds us that “it is Christ who lives at the heart of our fellowship and renews it day by day.”

As we give thanks for Rowan’s ministry as a poet and priest, as a modern-day apostle and teacher of the faith, we look forward to the ministry of his successor, Bishop Justin Welby, who brings a unique set of gifts to this office. To his enthronement as the 105th Archbishop of Canterbury on March 21st, I will carry the very best wishes of our Church in Canada and the assurance of our

prayers. In all his many travels throughout the Anglican Communion and in all his endeavors to hold us together in a holy fellowship of truth and love in Christ, may he know daily the blessings of freshly fallen grace. Pray with me that through his ministry “the wonders of God’s love” and “the glories of his righteousness” be known throughout the world.

Finally dear friends, I am pleased to note that in the spirit of Full Communion between our Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the General Synod and the National Convention will meet in Joint Assembly this July here in Ottawa. Through the theme “Together for the Love of the World” we seek to strengthen and stretch our common witness to the gospel within our Churches and within Canadian society at large. I am enormously grateful for all who are working so hard to welcome and host us and I ask your prayers for Bishop Susan Johnson and for me and for all the participants. May the “wonders of Christ’s love” and “the glories of his righteousness” inspire the life and legacy of this Assembly for years to come.

As we enter this new year, let us bear in mind and heart the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “All over the world today people are asking ‘Where is the path to joy?’ The Church of Christ answers loudly: ‘Jesus is our joy.’”

Amen