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Homily from the Opening Worship at Sacred Circle 2018

August 7, 2018

25 years ago, to this very day, and at about this very hour, a great Indigenous woman who was a faithful follower of Jesus Christ stood up at the closing Eucharist of the National Native Convocation in Minaki, Ontario and spoke these words. "On behalf of this gathering we acknowledge and accept the apology the Primate has offered on behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada. It was offered from the heart with sincerity, sensitivity, compassion, and humility. We receive it in the same manner. We offer praise and thanks to our creator for his courage. We know it wasn't easy. Let us keep him in our hearts and prayers, that God will continue to give him the strength and courage to continue this task." Vi Smith was responding to the apology Archbishop Michael Peers had offered the day before, August 6th.

Committed to choosing her words carefully, she sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the elders. And as we have heard, her message was clear and concise, heartfelt, and hopeful for what would come of that apology.

So I want us to take a moment of silence to remember Vi - her pride in being Indigenous, her joy in being Christian, and her own personal commitment to the very paths of healing and reconciliation of which Michael had spoken.

May the Lord grant her continued peace in his near presence, and may he grant us grace to follow her good example. Amen.

The presider at that Eucharist where the apology was accepted was our dear friend and brother Laverne Jacobs, and how blessed we are to continue to have him in our midst, and I honour you, Laverne.

Friends, you know that in the 25 years that have passed since the apology was first presented, pieces of it have been cited time and time again.

"I am sorry" said Michael, "more than I can say, that we were part of a system which took you and your children from home and family, that we tried to remake you in our image, taking from you your language and the signs of your identity, and that in our schools so many were abused physically, sexually, culturally, and emotionally. I know" said Michael, "how often you have heard words which have been empty because they have not been accompanied by actions. I pledge" said Michael, "to you, my best efforts and the efforts of the Church at the national level to walk with you along the path of God's healing".

We know those words so well. Indeed, for some of us they're etched on our very souls, as they ought to be. But on this occasion, the 25th anniversary of the apology, with which we open this 9th Sacred Circle, I want to draw your attention to a couple of the other profound statements within the apology, which from my perspective speak directly into the readings for today.

First Michael said, and I quote, "We failed you. We failed each other and we failed God". What Michael said here speaks directly to our reflection on today's reading from the prophet Jeremiah.

And the second thing Michael said, and I quote, "I have heard with admiration the stories of peoples and communities which have worked so hard at healing. I am aware of how much healing is needed. I also know I am in need of healing, my own people are in need of healing, and our church is in need of healing. And without that healing, we will continue the same attitudes that have done such damage in the past. I also know healing takes a long time, both for people and for communities".

What Michael said here speaks directly to our reflection on today's gospel reading from Matthew. So first of all, the prophet Jeremiah is writing in a time of exile, a very hard time for the people of Israel. Driven from their home lands they find themselves in a strange land. In the midst of a culture so far removed from anything their own - one in which they cannot sing their songs, dance their own dances, pray their own prayers.

Into the midst of their despair, the Lord speaks this word of promise. "I will restore the fortunes of Jacob's tents and I will have compassion in his dwellings... from them will come songs of thanksgiving and the sound of rejoicing. I will add to their numbers and they will not be decreased. I will bring them honor and they will not be disdained. Their children will be as in days of old and their communities will be established forever. Their leader will be one of their own, their ruler will arise from among them. I will bring him near and he will be close to me..."

Here is a word of promise as timely for Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island and around the world of ours, as for the people of Israel in exile, as timely a word of promise for Indigenous Peoples as I have ever heard. For it addresses the disdain Indigenous People have so often felt. It addresses the alienation you have so painfully known. It addresses the suffering you have endured through the conquering powers of empires from afar. But it also speaks of return, resilience, recovery. It speaks of homecoming. And it speaks of welcome. I will never hear that word welcome again without remembering that poem we heard this morning. Welcome.

It speaks of children's laughter and elders' wisdom. It speaks of self-determination, with respect to leadership in their own communities. And it speaks of the leader as being especially close to God. What a powerful message of encouragement and hope for the future.

This word of promise on the part of the Lord comes on the heels of that great text from the 29th chapter of Jeremiah, where the Lord speaks through his servant saying, "I know the plans I have for you, plans for your well being, and not your harm, plans for a future with a hope".

To keep the 25th Anniversary of the Apology faithfully is to be reminded, I think, even though it may be difficult, of the harm inflicted upon Indigenous Peoples in Canada and our own church's complicity. What happened in our history was nothing less than an assault on your dignity and your intelligence, your grace and generosity toward one another and toward the land, toward the Creator. Your way of life as people of the land was nothing less than an assault on your spirituality and your culture, your languages, your ceremonies, your ways of being in community, with enormous respect for grandmothers and grandfathers, huge love for your children, and great respect for the elders and their wisdom. What happened in our history was nothing less than an assault rooted in the evil of racism and the spiritual arrogance of a Papal Bull. What happened in our history in this land was nothing less than

an assault driven by the resolve to solve the "Indian problem" as colonial expansion made its way across the country.

To keep the 25th Anniversary of the Apology faithfully is to be reminded of the horrific legacy of the Residential Schools and the harm inflicted on the child taken and the parent left behind, the siblings separated, and the family destroyed. That any government, any missionary society, any Church should inflict such harm on so many people is a shame on our very soul. Michael Peers said it right, "We failed you. We failed ourselves. We failed God". We as a church have lived with this failure, this great failure, for a very long time, and we will have to for a very long time yet, until that day, until that day when the arc of history is finally, finally bent in the direction of the rightness of relationships with which God would have us all live, in the blessedness of genuine respect and loving kindness toward one another, and the justice that rolls down with that thundering roar and the rising mist of a mighty waterfall.

In the meantime, we continue to repent of our sins and express with as much integrity as possible our intention, as the Prayer Book puts it, "to lead the new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in God's holy ways." (p. 76 BCP)

That intention, I am convinced, remains the thrust of the apology and every effort to ensure that this apology is not some historic document, enshrined somewhere in an archive, but a living apology known for its actions that accompany its text. That intention, that hope, that yearning, that leaning into new life is the thrust of our Church's intention and commitment to the Calls to Action from Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

That intention, yearning, dream for new life, that has been the thrust of all the work of the Primate's Commission on Discovery, Reconciliation and Justice and the work of our Vision Keepers, from whom we will hear this week. The prophet speaks of a future with hope, not a hope of our own, as grand as that may be, but a hope that God has in store for us.

The prophet speaks of "a future with hope" and isn't that just what we seek to be about in this Sacred Convocation? And yes, in General Synod too. Seeking after that future for which God has a plan - a future with hope - leaning into it together and being held together within it. That "future with hope" is clearly the motivation of the work of the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples, the work of the Indigenous House of Bishops, Leadership Circle, and the ministry of the National Indigenous Anglican Bishop, Mark McDonald. A future with hope.

Indeed, it is the very language of those who authored the text, "Twenty Years After the Covenant", addressing the many crises and the overwhelming despair that marks daily life in so many Indigenous communities across Turtle Island. People dream of a "church of living hope", that we become that church. And you will hear much more about what that looks like in our learnings and reflections in the next few days. And you, the delegates to this Sacred Circle will make some decisions reflecting that dream.

Now, turning to the Gospel Reading appointed for today, we have two stories back to back. One is about the disciples and Jesus, the other is about the multitudes and Jesus, but they are both about trust in him. In the one, Jesus comes to the disciples walking on the sea. And in the other, the crowds are brought to him in the hope of healing. In the one, Peter steps out onto the watery waves to meet Jesus, but he begins to sink and lose heart. And then Jesus stretches out his hand to save him. In the other the

crowds, too many to number, stretch out their hands to touch him. Many can only touch the hem of his garment. Yet says the Evangelist as many did even that, they "were made perfectly whole", as the King James Version puts it. Well, as the Revised Standard Version puts it. Healed, as the New Revised Standard Version puts it.

I'm always struck by that image of such trust in the Lord, that if we even but reach out to touch the hem of his garment, we shall be healed, made whole, made well. Given our history in Canada, and certainly within our own church, Michael Peers said on the occasion of offering the Apology, "We are all in need of healing. And the healing we seek will take a long time. Time and again we are going to be those people who reached out to touch the hem of the Lord's garment".

Now the important thing, I think, is that we help each other to do that gracefully, not grabbing for the garment and clutching it, but making way for each other to reach for it and to touch it and then step back so others have the same opportunity - in the great hope that we shall all find our wholeness in Christ, to whom we pray as we sing, "You who know each thought and feeling, teach us all your way of healing, Spirit of all kindness: be our guide." (#612, Common Praise)

On this first day of the 9th Sacred Circle, we do indeed mark the 25th Anniversary of the Apology and the journey of Healing and Reconciliation to which it continually summons us. I am mindful with you of how far we have come. How far God has helped us to come, by God's wondrous healing grace, and with you, I am so thankful. But I am also mindful too of how much further we need to go and with you I am committed, as Michael Peers said, for the long haul to our freedom in Christ.

If I were to offer a word from this Sacred Circle to our Church this day, I would title it "More than ever." And the commentary would read like this: 25 years ago Archbishop Michael Peers presented an apology on behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada to the survivors of the residential schools. He spoke to all those gathered at the National Native Consultation in Minaki, Ontario. It was August the 6th. While Michael made reference to the fact that it was a Friday and that it was the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, he did not mention the fact that it was the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord. Yet I know in Michael's heart he would have known that.

Now all of the Evangelists who record that great moment in the gospel tell us, and I quote, "that from within the cloud that hovered over the holy mountain, a voice was heard. This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him". The first part of that are the words we heard at the baptism, at the river, but then there's this additional piece, particularly for the benefit of Peter and James and John. Listen to him. Here was instruction for them.

And friends, here is instruction for us. Listen to him. Listen to Jesus for he is our peace. More than ever, more than ever may we be as those of whom he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the ones who show mercy, and blessed are the ones who hunger and thirst after right relationships with God and one another".

More than ever let us persevere in ensuring that the church's Apology remains a living text, bearing an integrity worthy of the gospel and the teaching of the prophets. More than ever let us be unwavering in our resolve to spot and stop racism in the church and in this country. Let us be unwavering in our resolve to enhance, according to our baptismal vows, those reborn of water and the spirit, to enhance respect for the dignity of every human being. Let us be unwavering in our resolve to strive for right

relations among the children of God from all four directions. More than ever let us be determined in our efforts to educate our church about the lingering traces of the Doctrine of Discovery, to honor the calls to action from Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and to make good our public pledge to uphold the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. More than ever, let us remain committed to the paths of healing and reconciliation upon which the Apology set our feet.

Let us give thanks and pray for such generous support that sustains the ministry of the Anglican Healing Fund for years to come. More than ever, let us turn our hearts and minds to protect the most vulnerable, to weep with those who grieve their missing and murdered daughters and sisters and mothers and spouses, to rid this country of the crime of human trafficking. More than ever, let us be relentless in addressing the hard truth and the bloody reasons why Canada's prisons are so over crowded with Indigenous men, women, and youth. More than ever let us stand with those who cry out for justice, for things so basic as clean water, for good, not just adequate housing and comprehensive healthcare. More than ever let us love our children and nurture our teens toward health and happiness. More than ever, let us uphold and pray for those appointed to lead the church's work in preventing suicide, in helping young people to know that God's plan is for them to have a future with hope. More than ever, let us strive to be the church to which the apology continues to summon us. More than ever, let us be obedient to the call of the Father.

This is my beloved son. Listen to him. And finally, let us pray for grace that we may indeed abide in him and he in us. More than ever. Amen.

Amen.