

Homily for the Closing Worship of Anglican Deacon Canada's 2021 Virtual Conference

—The Rev. Lisa Chisholm-Smith; July 2021

Siblings in Christ, I speak to you in the name of the triune God: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

After Jesus' temptation in the wilderness Luke's gospel tells us that he "returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee"¹ where he taught in the synagogues and "was praised by everyone."² News about him spread throughout the whole countryside.³

So undoubtedly the people in Nazareth were filled with anticipation when he made a stop at the synagogue in his hometown and read the portion of the prophesy of Isaiah where it says:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

"The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him" when he rolled up the scroll, "gave it back to the attendant and sat down," assuming a posture used by rabbis for teaching. Imagine how astounded his hearers must have been when he then told them plainly, in verse 21: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it." Jesus was actually proclaiming that God's gracious, healing, liberating and life giving reign had come into reality that very day in and through him.

This was God's inauguration day in the person of Jesus Christ. The word inaugurate means "to introduce into office with suitable ceremonies"⁴ or to "make a formal beginning of; initiate; commence; begin."⁵

It is significant that the act that inaugurates the coming of God's Kingdom on earth is the public proclamation of God's prophetic Word during a worship service by the Word of God incarnate. Deacons as followers of Jesus and ordained servant leaders with Christ's church, are similarly called to be heralds of the good news and agents of God's reign in this world that God loves. Indeed, as Anglican Deacons Canada's new Vision statement puts it, the ultimate goal of our action, prayer and prophetic word as deacons, is "to call the church to action [pause] to enable the compassion and justice of God to be realized in the world."

Isaiah's vision echoes down through the ages, in the first sentence of ADC's contemporary expression of our mission:

Through its members, Anglican Deacons Canada (ADC) calls and encourages the church: to respond to human need by loving service, to seek to transform unjust structures of society, to pursue peace and reconciliation, and to protect, sustain and renew the life of the earth.

(The church Geeks among you will likely notice that this articulation of the mission of deacons borrows liberally from the five marks of mission of the worldwide Anglican Communion.)

The only element in this part of our new mission statement not hinted at in Isaiah's prophesy is the call to "protect, sustain and renew the life of the earth." That, however, is our original calling as humans, earth creatures⁶ made God's own image. Recall that in Genesis 2:15: "The LORD God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to farm it and to take care of it."⁷

Jesus' victory over all that oppresses, harms, imprisons, and blinds us in and through his suffering on the cross, death and resurrection is decisive for all time. Yet, we as deacons are also keenly aware that in the present moment the gracious reign of God inaugurated in the synagogue in Nazareth is far from being realized yet in all of its fullness.

Recent Canadian news headlines have made all too evident the painful gap between present wounds yet to be healed and injustices yet to be made right and the anticipated healing, liberation and reconciliation of God's future. Recently I watched a CBC interview with Janis Monture, historian and executive director of the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario, which is located on the site of the former Anglican-run Mohawk Institute Residential School:

“Why did it take a mass grave to prove what our communities have been saying for years about these places . . . ?” she asked with deep grief and great frustration evident on her face. “Our voices just weren't heard . . . and that's the frustrating part . . . I hope that if anything it proves . . . the survivors . . . what they were saying was true. It was always true.”⁸

How awful, how hurtful that the truthful testimony of indigenous peoples across this land has not been heard and acted upon for so long. All the more so, since when those who have suffered trauma or abuse summon up the inner courage to give voice to their story it is so important for their own healing that their testimony is believed and accepted.

The end of June also saw an unprecedented extreme heat wave hit British Columbia and other Western provinces resulting in hundreds of forest fires which sent all the residents of Lytton, BC fleeing for their lives and is putting the residents of other communities in potential harms way. Mike Flannigan, a wildfire expert and principal investigator of the Canadian Wildfire Strategic Network was also interviewed recently on CBC. His professional opinion on the situation was sobering. An increased number of wildfires fueled by increasing temperatures is a new reality that we as Canadians are going to have to learn to live with and manage and it will take an increased investment of resources for us to do so. However, the most sobering observation he shared, was that he and a colleague co-wrote a paper some twenty years ago sounding the alarm. The paper said that the need for governments and communities to act *then* to

prevent and manage an increased number of wildfires was urgent. How long, O LORD, will the earth creatures you made in your own image fail to act to preserve and restore your creation for the sake not only of humanity but all living things? We know that time is running out.

Of course, each one of us here could add to this list of pressing issues that cry out to be addressed: the urgent need for equitable global access to vaccines, systemic racism, poverty, homelessness, inadequate staffing and funding for long-term care homes, the opioid crisis, to name just a few. The needs and concerns can seem almost overwhelming. However, as National Indigenous Archbishop Mark MacDonald wrote in a published reflection in October, the early church's vision of its future work:

“isn't based on the capacity of available resources or the possibility of desirable recruits. It appears to be based on nothing more than a confidence in the prophetic word. . . . rather than being built on assumptions of human strength, . . . [the church] would grow in compassion for those in pain, need and strife. Their great harvest would be the poor and the outcast. They would embody the reconciling forgiveness of the World to Come in the makeup of their common life. They would build their life on the morality and vision of God's future.”⁹

The letter to the Colossians reminds us that Jesus the Christ, who inaugurates God's gracious reign in a synagogue in Nazareth, is before all things and in him all things hold together.¹⁰ No sphere of life or part of creation, no matter how small, is exempt from Christ's redemptive work. Indeed, all Christians from every walk of life can seek God's transformation wherever we are—in our workplaces, homes, the places where we volunteer, learn and play, our communities and beyond. As Bishop Peter Mason, who hired me fresh out of grad school as the founding Coordinator of the School of Lay Ministry in the Diocese of Ontario, has said: "Wherever and whenever something of Jesus' truth, love and righteousness exists, there the Kingdom of God can be found.”¹¹

I will close now with the first verse of a new worship song,¹² which was commissioned jointly by *The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity* in the UK and *Thy Kingdom Come*. It is a song that I look forward to sharing with the students I work with at Queen's University when the new term starts. A video version of this song will be played as part of our closing worship. The tune, an up-beat version of "Abide With Me," will be familiar. The lyrics cast a distinctly diaconal vision, and offer a prayer that God will work in and through us, Christ's humble servants, for the sake of the world God loves :

*We seek your kingdom throughout every sphere
We long for heaven's demonstration here
Jesus your light shine bright for all to see
Transform, revive, and heal society
Amen.*

1. Luke 4:14

2. Luke 4:15

3. Luke 4:14

4. Inaugurate | Definition of Inaugurate by Merriam-Webster

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inaugurate>

1 : to introduce into office with suitable ceremonies He was inaugurated as president.

5. Inaugurate | Definition of Inaugurate at Dictionary.com

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/inaugurate>

Inaugurate definition, to make a formal beginning of; initiate; commence; begin:

The end of World War II inaugurated the era of nuclear power.

6. I borrowed the term "earth creature" from Phyllis Trible's interpretation of Genesis 2 & 3 in her book, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress Press, 1978).

7. Genesis 2:15 Common English Bible

8. This is my transcript of Janis Monture's comments in the video clip posted as part of this article: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/mohawk-institute-residential-school-1.6073930>
9. "Looking around" by Mark MacDonald, published in the *Anglican Journal* October 13, 2020.
10. Colossians 1:17
11. The Rt. Rev. Peter Mason, "Vision 2000: The Final Report of the Visioneers Taskforce for Ministry into a New Millennium" Anglican Diocese of Ontario (January 1999), p. 2
12. "We Seek Your Kingdom" <https://licc.org.uk/resources/we-seek-your-kingdom/>
Melody: Eventide (Abide with me) by William Henry Monk (Public Domain)
Lyrics: Noel Robinson, Andy Flanagan, Graham Hunter. CCLI License:7078309