

Year A – Harvest Thanksgiving – 08 October 2017  
Deuteronomy 8:7-18; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Luke 17:11-19

Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of attending the 4<sup>th</sup> Vital Church Maritimes Conference. For three days people from across the Diocese and beyond, gathered to discuss, discern and discover the Good News of how God might be working in the world – beyond the Church as we currently know it.

Now granted, conferences such as these tend to gather like-minded people, and what we discussed can be for many quite mind-blowing when we are talking about “church”. However, the Church has never been a static entity that ‘never changes’. We may say “we’ve always done it like that” but the truth is that the Church has always been in a state of change and evolution – as it should be.

God has continued to create since that first day of creation. It stands to reason that God’s Church would need to keep pace with that change as well. And, so it has – from small gatherings in people’s homes with a loaf of bread and cup of wine, to gothic cathedrals and silver, jewelled chalices; from Latin words spoken in mystery to breaking open the Word in language the average person can understand. Throughout the centuries, the leaders of the Church have recognized that God is calling us to continue to grow, reach out, to share the Good News of Jesus Christ – actively and intentionally – with those who haven’t heard it yet or who have yet to experience Jesus’ love for themselves.

We see these changes, and participate in them as well, all the time. I mentioned last week that even our church decorations have changed through the years. In the not so distant past, churches like this one would have been decorated right now with the harvests of our lives – quite literally. We might see lobster pots and handwoven nets. There might be stalks of corn or hay bales, upon which would be homegrown gourds and homemade loaves of bread. But times have changed, our church communities have changed. We aren’t fishermen and farmers here anymore. We are an urban people with a mixed bag of vocations and interests. And with those changes come different kinds of harvests. Our thanksgiving symbols are just as valid today as those of yesteryear. They just aren’t traditional – what we have come to expect. For you see, what we have come to expect no longer speaks sufficiently of God’s presence in this place and in our lives. As we have changed, God has walked right along beside us.

Who God is has not changed, but who we are has. God’s creation has not changed in intent but the way humanity responds to God’s creation has changed. God loves us so much that God is willing to walk beside us into this new world that surrounds us. We may be surprised by what we are entering into; we may even be daunted and afraid of it; but God isn’t. God is right there calling us and encouraging us to go with him from the lobster pots and corn stalks into a world of His creation that has ... God knows ... but with God’s grace and the courage given by the Holy Spirit, we will find out!

In our passage from Deuteronomy this morning, we heard the promise God had given the Israelites through Moses: God was going to bring them - very soon in fact – into a good land with flowing streams, a land of wheat and barley, vines and fig trees. They were soon to enter into a new existence that would hold for them bread without scarcity and where they would lack nothing.

All of this must have been more than they could take in. This is a people who had been wandering the desert for 40 years after being freed from slavery in Egypt. Not one of the Israelites hearing this promise would have had memories of what life had been like back before things went wrong in Egypt. Even the oldest of the travellers was not old enough to remember the glory days of David's reign and the honor showed to his people. No, the oldest of this group would remember only the slavery and the oppression placed upon them by a heartless Pharaoh – a cruel and heartless god.

But now times have changed. Moses and Aaron and Miriam have been speaking of promises that were beyond comprehension. After the wandering in the desert, the battles against other nations, the punishments received for falling out of faith and creating the Golden Calf, finally their leaders are telling them that the time is coming when life as they have known it will change so much that they can't possibly imagine. *They are about to enter into a new reality where the one thing that hasn't changed is God.* And they are called to give thanks for this new opportunity!

For a very long time in the Church world, we have looked upon Thanksgiving as a time to look back and take stock and give thanks for all God *has already done, has already given us.* But times are changing and maybe we should engage in those changes as well. It is time to begin doing *both/and.*

We always need to show our appreciation to God for what has been shared with us and entrusted into our care, but we also need to begin leaning into the future in faith and giving thanks for what God has in store for us next. Like the Israelites who had been hearing about the promises for decades and are now being told that the promise is imminent, we too must live as if we believe that the promise is imminent. That living in immediate hope means we also have to start believing in that promise as well.

What promises has God made the Church? The one promise that is clear is that of Jesus Christ. We have been given the cleansing of our souls – we are forgiven – present tense. Promise fulfilled. We have been given the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ – already happened, we just haven't made the move to see it in its completeness yet. Promise fulfilled.

So what promise is not yet fulfilled? Jesus has not yet returned to receive all of God's creation back into the wholeness of God. But why not? This promise hasn't yet been fulfilled because the work is not yet done ... The world in its totality has not yet come to understand that they too can and should be offering thanksgiving to God through Jesus Christ. And that's where we come in as Christians who already acknowledge that most of the promises have been fulfilled. God has given us the responsibility of bringing people into relationship with Jesus so that they too can share in those promises fulfilled that we already share.

But how do we do that? How do we lead the world around us into true thanksgiving through Christ?

Back about 15 years ago, I was very involved with Youth ministry in my Diocese and I was asked to lead the "children and youth" portion of a visioning weekend for a parish in a small city in Ontario. At the end of the weekend, the adults' group had to share what they had done and the kids had to share their visioning as well. The adults' portion was pretty straight forward: new, upbeat music, make the building more accessible, discourage parishioners from kicking new

people out of “their” pew, and the list went on. The kids on the other hand were quite clear about where they believed God was leading the Church – and they were also clear that the Church they were envisioning was not simply their parish church but rather where the whole Anglican church should be heading.

Their church had no locks on its doors because “people need to understand that God never turns them away at the door.” They also envisioned the meeting rooms being turned into dormitories where homeless people would sleep, but there would be murals of Bible stories on the wall so they could learn about God the same way stained glass windows help people learn in church. The parish hall would be turned into a gym where teenagers could come and play basketball so they wouldn’t get in trouble out on the streets. There would also be a new building attached that would hold a small hospital where anyone in the neighbourhood could come and get help without having to wait so long at the doctor’s office. The kitchen would always have 3 square meals a day for the older folks who lived alone and of course, there would be ample microwave popcorn for those kids who just wanted to hang out.

I asked them about what church services would look like and their response was that we would have to keep those boring Sunday services for all the old fogeys but church should really be about the priest *and all the people* just talking about how much Jesus loves them and helping them to get to know the Big Guy, “understanding that God is just really the best.”

The group of kids I was working with ranged in age from 8-12 and they were dead serious about their work. They even made a ten-foot long poster to show people what their church of the future should look like.

When they showed the adults, there were chuckles and “oh, isn’t that so cute” comments abounding. What the adults of that church didn’t realize is that those children were prophets in their own town. That church has gone on as envisioned by the adults’ group and now struggles to maintain a half-time priest with a big building with bigger heating bills and fewer and fewer people. What they could not see was the truth that the children saw: The Church of tomorrow (arguably the Church of today as well) is not the inherited, traditional church.

We are called to embrace a practice of both/and: both inherited church for those who still need that *and* the church as Fresh Expressions of faith that lead people to want to know Jesus Christ and enter into a relationship with him. Worship in traditional ways *and reaching out in ways that don’t look like Church to us*.

The Conference I attended was all about discerning and understanding how God is calling us – the faithful believers – to reach out to people with the Good News of Jesus Christ, in ways that they will both participate in and connect with. The Church of tomorrow, and I would say the Church of today, cannot remain one that is simply inherited, traditional church. We must embrace both what feeds us *and* learn what feeds others. They’re not the same anymore.

Like the transition we have made in our celebrations and understanding of Thanksgiving, we have to walk with God and the Israelites into a world that we do not yet know. We will still be able to celebrate and decorate our faith lives as we always have but we will also need to learn how to live in this brave, new world that is filled with a bounty of wonderful things and new traditions that we still don’t yet understand. We can stand in the desert and lament, or we can march forward into the Promised Land singing our praises and Thanksgiving. But if we want to stay with God, we will have to walk where God leads. It’s really quite simple, and terrifying, truth be told. But like the Israelites and those kids who looked into the future, we have an adventure

ahead of us that will be greater than anything we can ask or imagine. And Jesus Christ will be right there waiting for all who we bring with us!