

ISAIAH 40:25-31; PSALM 19; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9; JOHN 1:1-18

I need to begin today by saying how much I struggled this week about whether I should speak today at all. For most of the week I really felt that this is a day when I should *not* speak, a day when I should stop speaking and listen, a day when the voices of First Nations people should be heard, first and foremost.

But then I listened to that sermon by The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II speaking in Washington National Cathedral last Sunday. It's been widely shared in social media so perhaps you've heard it. If you haven't, please give it a listen, or watch it on YouTube. I'm grateful to God and to The Rev. Dr. Barber for the privilege of hearing such a prophetic voice speaking in our time, and for reminding me that, inadequate as my words will be, and speaking as I do from this place of great privilege, my silence would be much worse than inadequate.

So if you will permit me, and forgive me, I will attempt to speak as sincerely as I can from my own limited experience.

National Indigenous Day of Prayer always feels personal to me, every year, for decades now. That's not because I am a person of First Nations descent. I am not. But my children are and, I admit it, I am proud for them to claim that heritage. I'm not proud of that

because it's politically correct or whatever. I'm proud because I have been privileged to be a witness, in a very personal way, to the proud history of First Nations people, to glimpse their traditional way of life. I've been changed forever by the opportunity of living with them, of being invited by them to be in ministry among them, and powerfully changed in encountering the incredible richness of their spiritual and artistic culture, not just in carving and visual arts which I think has reached a lot of us, but especially in music and dance, which are so close to my own heart.

It's helpful for me today – helpful and reassuring – to remember some moments when I did find the wisdom to keep quiet and listen to the voices of First Nations people. In 1997 and 1998 I was invited, through my bishop, by the Musgamagw Tsawataineuk people of Kingcome Inlet, to spend a summer with them, and to make a number of other visits, at Christmas, funerals, and other times. I have to say, I learned a lot about listening from those experiences.

When I refer to the proud history of First Nations people, I don't meant to suggest in any way that it has been an easy history. It has not, especially not in the past three or four hundred years. These are years of which Canadians cannot be proud when we

reflect on our relationship with First Nations people, upon whom we have depended in every way, and who have suffered horribly in our presence.

If we want to understand systemic racism we need not look south of the border. The Indian Act, an act of the Canadian Parliament passed in 1876, lays it out with great clarity and to the great benefit of non-aboriginal Canadians. In the regrettable words of our first Prime Minister:

“The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change.” (John A. MacDonald 1887)

This official position of “assimilation” and doing “away with” has created the most enormous opportunities for everyone one of us not designated by the Act as “status” or “registered.” Canada, as we now call it, is famous worldwide, synonymous in fact, with abundance of natural resources. Think of the incredible abundance we live with - mineral resources, fossil fuels, timber, water. Some of us still have first hand memories of the fishery we once took for granted. The abundance of it cannot be described. I had friends in childhood who more than once caught fish on

routine outings that were as long than they were tall. Everyone had a freezer full. It was kind of fun. We really had no idea how soon it would be gone. Getting unobstructed access to all of that was part of the purpose of the Indian Act.

One resource especially has been made available to every one of us through assimilation: land. This land. Think of how deeply we love it, what it does for us spiritually, how it nurtures us, what the beauty and wildness of it, even now, means to us. We're not much without this land. Think of being told that it is no longer ours and that we have no choice in the matter. Think of being rounded up one day, as was done to the Tsleil Waututh people who lived within sight of here, and taken by boat from where we live now, to some less desirable land on the other side of Burrard Inlet and told that's where we are allowed to be from now on. There's nothing we can do about it. It's the Indian Act.

Assimilation is a word of chilling coldness. I feel like I should not have to try today to enumerate the horrors done in the name of it. By now, we all should have some inkling. All I can say is repudiate it. Repent of it. Eradicate it. Do not be involved in assimilating anyone, let alone whole peoples. It is not something Christians can be part of. If we're in doubt of that, we need to re-read the Book of Amos, as the Rev. Dr. Barber helped us do so powerfully

last Sunday. If we want to understand sin, look at this history. It hurts horribly to have been part of it. I, personally, am deeply sorry and I pray God will hear me.

Almost 30 years ago, in 1991, in addressing our church's history of involvement in residential schools – which were a principal strategy of assimilation – The Most Reverend Michael Peers Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, against all legal advice, spoke his own apology to First Nations people. He didn't do that because he thought it would resolve the matter, but because he was profoundly sorry, more than he could say. A major effort by the church – and by the federal government – of healing and reconciliation has followed, and an effort to compensate survivors of residential schools. I have been privileged to represent the church at a number of alternative dispute resolution hearings, and to say the church's apology (and my own) to the survivors. I am so grateful to those who were willing to listen and who reached out to me (and to the church) in reconciliation. When I heard what they had been through, I could not think why they would.

The hearings were often whole days of keeping quiet and listening to survivors say the truth of what was done to them in residential schools: sexual abuse, starvation, beatings,

withholding of medical care, loneliness, shattering of families, young vulnerable children deprived of the presence of their families, forbidden to speak their language, taught to think that the families and heritage they were born into were wrong, shameful, forbidden, and to be done away with. That is the face assimilation in Canada: it's something we did to children. Let us be clear in saying never again.

I have been reflecting on where we, as Christians, can find the sin of assimilation in our scriptures, and where we can look for hope. Certainly one of the places is in the opening chapter of Genesis, verse 27: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God He created them...." In assimilation we sought to undo some of the work of the Creator. Not content to meet, respect, and celebrate the distinctiveness of First Nations peoples and cultures as they were, finding in them a reflection of God's image – as our own faith and convictions would have us do – but rather seeking, for our own benefit, to do a better job, to remake them in our own image.

There is so much to know of this history, even if we focus just on the Tseil Waututh, Squamish, and Musqueam peoples. We live and work on their land. Their historic dwelling sites can be seen from this church, in what we now call Stanley Park and Kits Point.

There were major villages there for more than 3000 years, and until the 19th Century they were part of one of the "largest, most densely populated nations in aboriginal North America..."¹ We should not forget. The history of how it came about that they no longer live there is recorded in the minutes of Vancouver City Council, among other places. Some of our great grandparents were there.

If there is hope for Canadians in our relationship with First Nations people, and I very much believe there is, it is in the work of truth and reconciliation. This goes to the essence of what it means to be followers of Christ. As Paul of Tarsus wrote in his Second Letter to the Church in Corinth, "...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,* not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_Jack_Khatsahlano