

PANDEMIC SEPARATION AND CHRISTMAS PRESENCE

Sermon preached by Bishop Terry Brown at Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton, Ontario, on the Fourth Sunday after Advent, 19 December 2021. Texts: Micah 5:2-5a, Hebrews 10:5-10, and Luke 1:39-45.

May I preach in the name of the one God: The Ground of our being, the Word made Flesh, and Eternal Love.

First, let me extend my thanks to Bishop Susan, the Dean, and all of you, for your willingness to have me as one of the Cathedral's honorary assistants. As a priest for 46 years and a bishop for 25, I appreciate the opportunity still to preach and preside. Many of my years of ministry were served in the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific, so it is a special joy too for me to serve here with the Dean, whose roots are in Aotearoa/New Zealand. We share Antipodean friends and experiences.

For my first sermon in the Dean's presence, it seems only appropriate to begin with a story about Bishop George Augustus Selwyn, the first Bishop of New Zealand. In the mid-19th century, Bishop Selwyn was building up the new diocese and often recruited clergy from England. One morning, the ship arrived in Auckland Harbour with a new clergy recruit. The tide was out, and the ship could not reach the shore. The crew advised him, "You'll have to wade ashore." Finely dressed, the priest was outraged and said he would do no such thing. A message was sent ashore. After awhile, a craggy, poorly dressed man waded from the shore to the ship. "Here," he said, "get on my back". Seeing no other choice, the priest wrapped his arms around the man's neck and was carried ashore. Upon arrival, he detached himself, straightened his clothes, raised himself to his full height, and declared, "Take me to Bishop Selwyn!" The man who had carried him ashore turned to him and said, quietly, "I am Bishop Selwyn".

The story is one of Love (this week's Advent theme) as servanthood, getting one's hands (and feet) dirty, for the sake of the Gospel. We think of biblical passages about Jesus: "He emptied himself and took the form of a servant." "I am among you as one who serves."

We all have pandemic stories. I hope you will forgive me if I tell you one of mine. In February 2020, after retiring from the Church of the Ascension, I left for three months in Brisbane, Australia, staying with the Anglican Franciscans and their parish there, to have a quiet place to work on my book on the history of the Sisters of the Church in the Solomon Islands. The pandemic hit and Australia closed its borders very tightly. Initially, I was happy enough to be stranded and locked down in Brisbane, one of my favourite cities, as I was with friends, it was still possible to worship, the parish was friendly and welcoming, the food was good, and I was able to write. However, as the months dragged on, I realized I was genuinely stranded, with no firm departure date in sight; airline reservation after reservation cancelled, the ticket prices outrageous, Australian visa fees and requirements intensifying; and I was still renting my empty apartment in Hamilton; I got tired of my narrow monastic bed and of the Friary's overly aggressive dog, and so forth. Finally, after nine months in Brisbane, through the great

generosity of the Brothers and the Parish, I flew home at the end of November last year, returning to my own apartment, my own bed, and my own country, and yet another Canadian winter.

My small, mostly comfortable, nine-month exile in Brisbane forced me to think of others who have had much more drastic experiences of exile and separation, perhaps permanent exile – experiences, I know, that some (or even many) of you here have had. I thought, for example, of Korean families, even husbands and wives, divided for decades without communication by the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea, making the reunification of Korea an alive and deep issue today for the Korean churches and nations. I thought of refugees, separated from their families, whether re-settled, or in refugee camps or in transit. I thought of those who have voluntarily left their families to seek work overseas, whether Filipino nurses, or Latin American and Caribbean farmworkers, and the resulting separations to families. (The numbers are not small. 85% of nursing graduates in the Philippines go on to work overseas. While Australia prohibited its own citizens from returning from overseas during the pandemic, it has welcomed thousands of South Pacific Islanders to pick fruits and vegetables and work in abattoirs, work that Australians refuse to do.) And more recently, we have again become aware of the tragic separations entailed in the Indian Residential Schools.

In the light of these and many more separations, mine was small. I knew it would eventually come to an end. It did, and after two weeks of quarantine, I entered, with you, another separation, the Ontario lockdown of last December, in a bubble of one.

Separation, isolation, quarantine, loneliness, depression, perhaps even despair and death, these have become the experiences, emotions, and words of our last two years. Theologically, they are, of course, part of our experience of the Cross: of Jesus's separation from his Divine Parent, his cry of abandonment, his suffering, his death: but lifted up in Resurrection. In our experiences of lockdowns and separations over the past almost two years, I am sure we have all had some experiences of Resurrection too, whether of personal growth, new skills, completed projects or even expanded friendships, even if only digital.

But what does all this reflection on separation have to do with Advent, which we are still marking, and Christmas which we shall soon celebrate?

Put bluntly, Christmas is about *presence* – God's presence with us (Emmanuel) and our Christlike presence to one another — the very opposite of separation and absence. Indeed, the Messianic Reign prophesied in Isaiah and the other prophets, which we have been hearing about in our Advent readings, is about the gathering in of all nations and peoples into a community in which God will be present, in a new and immediate way.

As we near Christmas, today's Gospel turns from John the Baptist and his message of repentance in preparation for the Messianic Reign to the simple domestic story of how that Reign will soon come about: Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth when both were pregnant, Mary with Jesus, Elizabeth with John. The closeness of the two women is such that the unborn

John leaps in Elizabeth's womb, sensing the unborn Jesus nearby. Elizabeth prophesies Jesus's Messianic ministry and exclaims to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Mary responds with the Magnificat, that revolutionary hymn describing God's reign of justice, love, and divine presence, soon to be ushered in.

Somewhat casually, at the end of the Magnificat, Luke comments that Mary remained with Elizabeth for three months, rather a long time of mutual presence and support.

Likewise, today's passage from Micah turns from the earlier Advent penitential theme of repentance to the domestic details of the birth of the Messiah: an obscure prophesy of a Messianic birth in the small town of Bethlehem, one who will stand and feed his flock, and be present with them in justice, peace, and security. And in the passage from Hebrews, that ritual sacrifices and offerings, which often required separation and abstinence, are not anymore desired by God, but rather the presence and offering of Jesus Christ, once and for all. Advent leads us away from separation to presence.

And Jesus is born, God among us, Emmanuel, the Presence of God with us in the infant Jesus and his subsequent ministry to his death on the Cross, his Resurrection, Ascension and Glorification.

As Christians, just as we are encouraged to internalize Christ's death and resurrection in our lives, so we are encouraged to internalize God's presence in Christ, whether by ourselves being present to one another as Christ to each other, "Christ's hands and feet in the world" in St. Theresa words, or always trying to see Christ in the other, as in the Benedictine tradition, always the servant, not the proudly served, as in my beginning story.

All the public health restrictions of the pandemic, which I fully support, do not remove our obligation to be present to the world in love, as God became present to us in the Incarnate Christ. Indeed, all the separations of the pandemic force us to work harder to be present, and do not give us an excuse to withdraw selfishly into ourselves.

For example, we can, as this cathedral congregation has often done, seek ways to reach out to those who are especially isolated at this time: those living alone, those isolated from friends and family, those stranded, those in long-term care facilities (even if the protocols are difficult), and those imprisoned. The Sunday afternoon "open church" is one such initiative.

We are also called to recall those in our communities whose lives have been shaped (whether overall or more immediately) by isolation and separation, and who still grieve lost friends, families, places, and homes. We can provide comfort and friendship. Beyond ourselves, we can encourage government immigration programs for the reunification of families (there is a terrible backlog), assist refugees to settle in Canada and protest deportations. Beyond our nation, we can be aware of situations and become advocates, where Canadian and global government and business policies and practices destroy families and, indeed, whole peoples,

languages, and cultures. On the global stage, Canada is sometimes a bad actor in areas of resource extraction and arms sales.

And then there are the contemporary results of historical oppressive separations: slavery, colonialism and post-colonialism, cheap acquisition of Indigenous lands (or even theft), broken treaties, the terrible legacy of Indian residential schools and other forms of incarceration. Pulling down a few statues hardly addresses the issues. To these historic sinful separations, Christmas calls us to be present with repentance, listening, friendship, humility and even reparations.

Finally, we come back to ourselves and our personal experiences of isolation, separation, and death: that no matter how great the pain, we are always in God's presence and, indeed, through God's grace, we have the power to be God's presence to others, not sinking into despair but open to divine healing and reconciliation. Memories can be healed. Forgiveness, hope, love, and solidarity are not something we have to manufacture from scratch; but rather they are supernatural graces, God's free gift to us, both to be comforted and encouraged by the divine Presence and to offer it to others. We prepare the ground; God gives the growth.

As I began with a Bishop Selwyn story, it seems only appropriate that I end with another. Bishop Selwyn, like Bishop Strachan, first bishop of Toronto, and Dean Geddes, first Dean of this Cathedral, was an old fashioned High Churchman, placing great value on the church and the sacraments. However, for his new Diocese in New Zealand, he recruited all sorts of clergy: Evangelicals, High Churchman, Tractarians, and others – we might say he was “inclusive”. Some complained to him about the variety of clergy who appeared on the scene, suggesting that he might do a little better job screening them. He defended himself with an aphorism, “a running stream purifies itself”: that what was important was steady growth, movement and interaction: Note: a “running stream” rather than a flash flood, or a dry riverbed, or a stagnant pool. The image is also quite biblical. My favourite Solomon Islands chorus (which I shall not attempt to sing) is entitled “Streams of living water.” My impression of this cathedral parish is that it is just such a “running stream” and I praise you for it. May that flowing stream be one of God's Presence, Emmanuel, in the Christmas season and the years ahead.

Let us pray: Streams of living water, flow inside of us. Come Holy Spirit, flow through us. Amen.