

A Small Reversal

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[0 : 00] Let us bow our heads in prayer. Heavenly Father, when your disciples gathered together in the upper room, your Holy Spirit came upon them, filled them with all grace and zeal and power.

We pray you to send that same Holy Spirit amongst us here as we gather to worship today. May he open our ears to hear your Holy Word, open our minds to understand it, and open our hearts that that Word may live and grow and expand there, and from our hearts will spread to the hearts of other people.

And this we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen. Please be seated.

I greet you this morning from, bring you greetings from your brothers and sisters in our diocese of the Anglican Network in Canada, extending from St. John's, Newfoundland, where today they're battering down for Ophelia, Hurricane Ophelia, which I think now thankfully is reduced to a tropical storm, but no doubt it will be windy and wet there, right to Vancouver Island.

And now we have parishes in almost every one of the geographical provinces of Canada. But I want to even bring you greetings from our primate, Archbishop Duncan, and from the Anglican Church in North America, our province.

[1 : 59] This past week I spent almost the whole week at Sumas in Washington State with all of the bishops of the province gathered with their primate to seek guidance and direction as we move forward, knowing that many of us are coming from different traditions and different ways of doing things, even though we are all very much part of the great Anglican family around the world.

In fact, next week I'm going to have much joy, if all goes well, to be in El Paso, Texas, to participate in the installation of Bishop Felix Orgy, who many of you know from his connection with St. John's and which connection he speaks of very, very highly indeed.

I didn't know what to expect this morning when I came. I knew you had moved to the new building, and this is only your second or third week here, and I know you still may be going through some growing pains just familiarizing yourself with the building.

I think I witnessed that this morning when I saw Nora coming in with a huge container of what some people thought was food, but it was food for the spirit because it helped transform this into a situation with which you are familiar.

And I can only, I couldn't visualize this, but I can thank God for his providence in providing something like this at a time when you needed it so very badly.

[3 : 31] And while it is not the building you've just come from, it is still the house of God, and it is the place where you will each week and times during the week come to rejuvenate yourself, to get yourself stirred up again, to go out into Vancouver to carry on the same ministry you were carrying on in your, in the premises which was so known and so loved to you.

It's been 18 months almost now since I had the opportunity to be with you. That was a glorious time, at least glorious time for me because I was given a whole week to spend in the parish and every day attend the various organizations and every day to be able to meditate with you in your habit of having a passage of scripture, a series of sermons, and to hear each group thinking about it during the week and then having it come to a culmination on Sunday as you gather together.

I don't know any other parish, I'm sure there must be, but I don't know of any other parish which does things that way. And I, while I love the, the, the, the, the, the, lectionary with the various passages coming up, there's something from a teaching purpose indeed, and a spiritual purpose to be gained from doing it like this.

For example, when I was here 18 months ago, you were going through the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Indeed, you've gone considerably through the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and I was

told the week I'd be here we'd be dealing with Acts 21.

And I must confess to you, I never see Acts 21 now, but I think of that particular week and the various interpretations we had on things because in that particular time, Paul was convinced by God that he had to go to Jerusalem, and everyone else was convinced by God that he shouldn't go to Jerusalem.

[5 : 34] And I remember being quite perplexed with one particular passage there, and seeing Dr. Packer in the congregation getting even more perplexed as I tried to bring it forth.

And afterwards, I went to the, when I went to the door to see him, he, see everybody to greet him there, this is my chance now. So I said, Dr. Packer, what do you think was the reason for this? And with a very lovely little twinkle in his eye, he said, that, dear Bishop, is something you and I will have to ask St. Luke when we meet him.

And I'm using that little example now and then when I've asked for something which I really can't understand. I said, well, when we see St. Luke, he wrote it. He'll be able to tell us what he really did mean at that particular time.

So when I was told you were dealing with the beginning study of the book of Samuel, I was quite intrigued. The Samuel and Kings are my two favorite books from the preaching purposes in the Old Testament.

[6 : 37] And so much of what is brought forward there comes to us in the New Testament as well, one way or another to the various parallels that are there.

One of the reasons I haven't been here sooner is that I know of your idea of doing these series of preachings. You don't want always to have a visitor coming in disrupting the series right at the more critical points of it.

And so at the same time, I wanted to be with you as soon as possible after you made your move. And I said, I'm quite willing. Indeed, I'm looking forward this morning at 10 o'clock to sitting at the feet of my dear friend David Short and seeing how he launches this particular aspect of Scripture. I'm just going to reflect upon it because I don't know what the overall plan of the series is. But at this early hour this morning, just to suggest a couple of things to you that I think is meaningful in our own personal lives and in the life of the Church today.

The thing that impresses me about things I'm reading about that happened thousands of years ago is that how very much human nature still remains the same.

[8 : 01] Human relationships still interplay. And in this particular case with Alcana, at a time when the tradition was to have more than one wife, found that the two wives he had weren't getting on particularly well together.

And I have talked to people in Africa where polygamy is still being practiced. And they have said to me, the most difficult thing about having multiple spouses is that they keep falling out amongst one another thinking that the husband is giving more attention to one than to the other.

And it's sort of implied here too, that one wife is jealous of the attention the other one is getting and yet feels inadequate because she has been unable to supply a child for the fruition of their marriage.

And so the jealousy and rivalry are there. And yet we find Hannah is filled with love for her husband but also for this desire that she wants to have a child.

And she goes up with her husband when the time comes, their time to go up to the feast and is praying so earnestly that old Eli thinks this is a drunken woman.

[9 : 24] How often do we find experiences of the Holy Spirit reminding people of drunkenness? It's so erratic in the way it was. And here she is, we're told, with her lips moving but no sound coming out.

And Eli says, it's my job to take her to task this morning for this woman coming here to the house of God in this drunken condition. And he accosts her on it and she says, no, no, that's not it.

I am looking for a special blessing from God. And she makes a vow. And this is the part I want to mostly talk about.

She says, Lord, if I can have a son, I will give birth to him and I will raise him for the first little while and then I will give him back to you.

He will be yours. He comes from you. I give him back to you for your service. A promise that is setting things up for the great role that Samuel is going to have.

[10 : 32] It's not unusual in Scripture, as I'm sure you know, for childless women to pray to God that they may be able to have a child. You think of the Shumanites, Elijah, the Shumanite and her little boy, Hannah, in the New Testament, Elizabeth in her old age, you know, the mother of John the Baptist.

I guess the only big difference in these, they're going to the Lord and saying, Lord, please give me a child. In the case of Hannah, she says, if you give me a child, I'm going to give him back to you to be your servant here on earth.

In the case, though, of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mary didn't go and say, I want a child, I want Jesus. Instead, the tables were turned here and God comes to Mary. Rather than Mary coming to God, he finds someone he thinks not just suitable but worthy to be able to be the mother of his son.

But Hannah made the vow. Hannah then becomes pregnant and has the boy that she was promised. And now she has a promise.

[11 : 49] And I'm just imagining and probably reading more into than maybe I should when I think of how difficult that must have been to her, wanting to have the child so very badly, praying, if I can get one, I'd even do this, and then getting one, and probably saying, but do I have to do that?

Do I have to give him back? Can't I keep him? There must have been, what I often find with people with promises and vows, you say, well, I made that on the spur of the moment, but now I have a chance to look at things a bit differently.

Maybe, you know, God wouldn't take it too seriously if I water it down a little bit, keep him until he's 16 or keep him until normally he would take up a profession of his own.

And yet she realizes that a vow is a vow. Incredible story, of course, of the keeping of the vow. Just a little bit earlier in the Old Testament, in the book of Judges, chapter 11, Jephthah, who makes a vow to God that if I can only win this battle, even though the enemies are great, if I can win this battle, the first thing I see when I come home, I'll sacrifice to the Lord, no matter how good a possession it is, thinking of his animals, his cattle and all this sort of thing.

And God allows him to win the battle. And he comes home, and as he enters his gate, the doors of his house open, and out comes his daughter, his only child, coming out, welcome home, Daddy, playing the timbrels and dancing before him, and rejoicing to God that her daddy survived the battle.

[13 : 36] And Jephthah stands and stares at her in amazement, because he knows his oath. His oath was, I will sacrifice the first thing I see. And the first thing he saw was the thing he loved most.

And yet he had made a vow. And the vow meant to him that it had to be fulfilled. And it meant to the daughter that it had to be fulfilled. She doesn't struggle against this.

You must do what you have promised God you are going to do. We're living in far different times.

We're living in times when we often take a promise we've made to God in a much lighter mode.

We've made promises at our baptism. We make promises at other times in our lives. We do it in the confines of the church. And at the time we make them, it seems like nothing could ever possibly take us away from them.

And yet, when either the tempter comes, or we see things in a different light, we say, well, God wouldn't mean for me to keep that now, would he?

[14 : 43] And it makes a travesty sometimes of the promises we have made. Dear friends, I'm sure as you move into the book of Samuel, you'll get greater insights.

Notice in chapter 2 that Hannah's prayer is so very similar to the Blessed Virgin Mary's prayer. My soul does magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.

The Magnificat. Just look at the similarities of those first ten verses with that. I want to spend the next very little while, again, to stress how much you have been in the thoughts and prayers of so many people.

I'm sure you don't realize, A, how well known your parish is, and the difficulties you were going through, and the number of prayer groups and warriors and intercessors that have been praying for you through this difficult time.

And I would say that last week with bishops from all over North America with me, I was asked so many times, many times, how are they doing at St. John's?

[15 : 58] How have they managed to take care of that large congregation, all of those things? And what I've noticed from talking to some of you before getting here, especially having a nice chat with Dan there last week, the pattern is much the same.

There's sorrow and there's regret from leaving something you loved and knew and was just a part of you. It wasn't just a building. It was a part of you. The difficulty of coming to decisions as to how you are going to function without a critical part of your ministry.

But I thank God that you realize that that critical part wasn't the ministry. It was an enabler for the ministry, and that when one door was closed, another would be opened.

Because I would also go so far as to say that most of you, if not all of you, have also felt a joy and a freedom that comes from knowing that you have kept your vow.

I've heard you many times when I've come out here for meetings say, when the time comes if we have to make our decision, we know how we're going to make it. Because nothing is more precious than keeping the word of Almighty God.

[17 : 18] And that joy and freedom will be something which will help sustain you in carrying out your ministry. There's a wonderful little poem written right after the conclusion of the Second World War.

Everyone suddenly burst out singing, and I was filled with such delight as prison birds may find in freedom. On, on, and out of sight.

There's a freedom there that comes from knowing that you have done what God wanted you to do.

And though you've gone through the pain, you're also now going through the joy.

Jesus put it so well. A woman, when she is in travail, has sorrow because her hour has come. But when the child is delivered, she rejoices because a person has been born into the world.

You have had in many ways, whether you wanted it or not, a new birth. I recently heard a Ugandan bishop say that the worst thing you can do in the desert, the very worst unpardonable thing, is to know where there's water and not share that knowledge with anybody else.

[18 : 34] Keep that water for yourself and for your family. And for us as Christians in this critical stage of our development, we know where the water is.

We're drinking from the wells of that water. But we must be able to share it with a parched and hungry land. And it is my prayer to St. John's Vancouver, as you now see where God is going to lead you, and you don't know where he's going to lead you in so many ways.

But you know he is leading you, and you know that you are following. You know that you are following as part of a family who shared your sorrow in having to make a move, but also will share your joy as you reach out in ways you never anticipated to this great city of Vancouver and to the church that we are called to plant in his name in this country of Canada.

God bless and keep you in these endeavors. Amen. Amen. Amen.