

Advent Mission

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Well, a very great welcome to all of you.

On behalf of us at St. John's here, we extend a very warm welcome to all the guests and visitors here today. Thank you for coming.

I understand the scalpers did quite a job today and made a few bucks outside. We oversold some tickets for doubly sold, so it turned out to be quite a day. The staff told me that tonight David Frost is coming to speak, and they had asked for the ballroom here, which holds 400 people, and yet they're only able to attract 265 people.

And I don't know what that means for our special speaker today, but I think it sounds good. First, let me put your minds at ease, because a lot of people have asked.

That is, this is not going to be a fundraising event. This church is not out to embark upon a big capital campaign. You will not be asked for any money. So just sit back and relax.

[1 : 14] It's amazing how many people asked when they're asked to come. Said, well, what is another fundraising event? Well, this isn't, fortunately. My name, by the way, is Ken Stevenson.

I'm a member of St. John's. I've been a member there for quite a few years. And we have a good group there, and we really enjoy it. I want to tell you something about the Advent mission that we're on.

This luncheon is part of a week-long mission program that St. John's has embarked upon. And, well, for those of you that know me, I love salmon fishing.

And we have a summer cottage over at Qualicum. And there's a spot over the north end of the Skidi Island, just off the Fagan Islands. There's a spot there that I guarantee you can catch fish at.

The seals must think so, because they're just very plentiful on the nearby islands. And the reason I'm telling you this is that I find that when I have something like this, this is very exciting to me, I like to tell other people about it.

[2 : 25] And that's what this Advent mission is all about, is we feel at St. John's that we've got some great news and something that we're sold on, and we'd like to reach out to the community and tell other people about it, just like I like to tell people about the great spot to go catch some salmon.

Well, I'd like to just say a few words about myself. Well, I've always been very much achievement-orientated and go for the top.

And I guess those of you who know me, I wouldn't say I'm successful, but I think I've reached a certain plateau in life, or I had reached a certain plateau, but four or five years ago, and I thought this should be great.

I'm at the top. I'm doing well. And yet I found I was certainly lacking something. And it was almost as if I was, as Harry said last night, I was talking to us about being a prisoner in jail.

And that was the feeling I had four or five years ago. I got up to the so-called top, and yet I felt very, very uptight and very, very convicted by all my desires, and unable to express myself.

[3 : 40] And I was getting more and more depressed. I found that my time with my family wasn't really fruitful, because I'd go home and I'd spend some time with them after working 60, 70 hours a week, but I wasn't really communicating with them.

My mind was always on my business, and I found that my life, I wasn't very proud of it. And I guess in the darkness of the time I was going through, and heck, I felt I was getting at the top or near the top, and heck, things were working the opposite way.

I wasn't enjoying life that much. And that's when I saw God's light, and things seemed to change. And so I started reading a great deal and trying to understand what God's purpose is in this life.

There has to be more to life than what I was doing, running around and building up an empire, but not getting anything out of it. And so I started studying and reading, and my wife did, and our family did.

We became what we call Christians. And that is, it's quite a momentful moment in our life. It's more important to us than any of my other achievements I've ever done, becoming a Christian, because it brought a feeling of freedom.

[4 : 55] I was no longer a jailed-up captive. I felt free. I still have the desire to achieve. I still have the aggressiveness. But it's diverted.

It seems to take on a different importance in my life. And so that's what this mission's about, is to tell other people about how we feel about our God, who loves us very much, loves us so much, that he came to earth through Jesus Christ, and you know what we did to him.

And I think that it's, I find it very interesting, and it's certainly changed our life. And you know, there's somebody at every one of these tables who believes just as strongly, is probably able to express it an awful lot better than I can.

I don't express myself very well, but there's somebody, I guarantee you, at each table, one, maybe even more, who can tell you an awful lot in better terms and ways than I can. But I just want to tell you that it means a great deal to me, and I hope that you would just ask questions.

At St. John's, we're very fortunate. We have a very good group of people there, and great vectors, and we feel very fortunate.

[6 : 09] We have a very open attitude, too, and that is to ask him questions. You know, if there's a God, how can he allow all this suffering on earth? And all these sort of questions, and we just invite people to come and ask questions.

The more your questions you ask, the better we like it. You don't have to come in and just follow us all. We want you to come and ask questions and try to figure things out yourself, and we have lots of group discussions.

And to that event, we're having this Mission Week this week, and we have a tonight at 7 o'clock, and tomorrow night at 7, and Friday night at 7, 7 to 8, 15. There's a tremendous series of talks that Harry is giving, and I haven't missed one, and I'm not going to miss one.

They are just so interesting, and I guarantee you, you enjoy it much more than going home and watching television and anything else that you want to do. But if you do can get a chance, please turn up.

If you can't, don't forget we have two sermons on Sunday, and that's what this sheet here, you've all got one of these. It tells you what schedule we have. There's other events happening this week also. Finally, I would like to, it's, yeah, time.

[7 : 18] I would like to ask a good friend of mine, Bob Phillips, to introduce our special speaker today. Bob? Bob Phillips, Thank you very much, Ken.

It's certainly a very great pleasure for me today to have been given the opportunity to introduce our guest speaker, someone who I consider to be a very good and close personal friend, the Reverend Harry Robinson.

Harry, as I'm sure everybody in the room knows, is a combination of our pastor, our minister, our rector, our parish priest at St. John's Shaughnessy United Church on the corner of Nanton and Grenville.

When I came to, sorry, when I came to Vancouver several years ago, I was warned that the one thing I had to be very careful about was how I got into any discussions about Eastern Canada, any discussions about the province of Ontario, and more particularly, what I said about the city of Toronto.

And I've certainly taken that to heart in the seven and a half years that I've been fortunate to live here in Vancouver. But with the case of our speaker this afternoon, it's very difficult to talk about Harry without getting into some of those touchy subjects, shall we say.

[8 : 55] I can start off by saying, of course, that Harry was born in Hogs Hollow. And anybody from Vancouver, I'm sure, doesn't have a clue where Hogs Hollow is. So I'll tell you, it's that part of Toronto that's just north of Toronto, but it's still part of Toronto.

Harry's schooling, of course, for very good reasons, took place in Toronto. And upon completion of public school, Harry was fortunate to attend the University of Toronto School.

And for those of you that do not know what UTS is all about, I can remember some 30 or 40 years ago that UTS was a very austere school as an adjunct to the University of Toronto with a very, very heavy peer group pressure and a very high scholastic standard.

And I can put it this way that I don't think a dummy ever got through UTS. Harry graduated from UTS, stayed in Toronto, went on to University College, which is one of the several colleges, of course, at the University of Toronto.

since he migrated to the UK, to London, and attended Oak Hill College, and then came back to Canada, again back to Toronto, where, you know, here in the Anglican Church in Canada, we're a little like the Scots.

[10 : 09] We can take the high road and we can take the low road. And we have two seminaries in Toronto, two Anglican seminaries, connected with the University of Toronto, and one's a little higher and one's a little lower.

And I won't tell you which is which. I will say, though, that Harry did go to Wycliffe and graduated from Wycliffe. And about this time, we move on now, it's about 1955, and Harry decided to get married.

And to give you some idea of what a practical theologian that Harry is, that he obviously had family in mind when he got married, so what did he do? He went over to the Western Hospital and picked out a charming, good-looking young nurse and married her so that when the four children came along, they would be adequately looked after because Harry's problems were at the church.

It seemed to have worked out very well. They're still married. Fran is sitting at his side. And they now have accumulated, I believe, it was two grandchildren in France. Or do we have three? We have two. Okay. They'll probably have three very shortly.

So now we've got Harry all educated and all married, and the inevitable had to happen. If he's going to starve to death, we didn't go to work. So Harry took his first charge in Kingston, Ontario, the Limestone City, which you know is approximately halfway between Toronto and Montreal.

[11 : 25] And there he started a church on his own from scratch. And when he got that underway, he had a sufficient time to work as assistant pastor in several of the other Anglican churches in Frontenac County and eventually reestablished a church that had been a mission of the cathedral in Kingston into another church.

So before he left Kingston, he had actually founded or founded and refounded two new churches. However, in researching Harry's background, I found out that he spent some time in the pen.

And again, you all know that's the Kingston Penitentiary. However, I did a little more research and I found out that under Canadian law at that time that pastoral counseling was not an indictable offense in Canada.

So Harry was in for good works and no other reason. From 1968 to 1978, some 16 years, Harry was in Toronto at the Little Trinity Church, which again is in a rather unique part of Toronto, which is referred to, I guess affectionately by Torontonians as Cabbage Town.

And Cabbage Town is that part of Toronto which is in the center of Toronto and Harry's church was I believe the oldest Anglican church in Toronto and it's a church that drew from all over the city. And I guess before Harry's incumbency, it had been noted for being an Irish Protestant church and for being evangelical.

[12 : 44] And there's certainly any question about it that in the latter case that Harry carried on that tradition, the Irish I'm not sure of. In 1971, the church gave him a year sabbatical.

He went to Cambridge in the UK and again returned to Little Trinity. And I'm going to say that there's no question in my mind that Toronto's loss was Vancouver's gain when in 1978 Harry came to St. John's Shaughnessy, our church.

And if I can digress for 30 seconds, a month or so ago I was in Japan and Tokyo and I stayed overnight in the new Otani Hotel and going on the next day to Kyoto and I noticed a sign in the lobby that there was a church service, a chapel service on Sunday morning at 10 o'clock in the garden of the hotel which is quite extensive Japanese garden.

So I got up in time to have breakfast amongst all the various tours that were having breakfast and got over to church on time and as part of the church service which was a sort of a Baptist, non-denominational Christian church service.

As part of that, everybody that was there got up and introduced themselves and said some little thing about where they had come from and perhaps what their church affiliation was. And I got up and of course told them who I was and where I came from, what I was doing and said that I came from St. John's Shaughnessy in Vancouver, Canada the only Anglican slash Episcopal you have to say that so the Americans know where you come from Episcopal evangelical church in Canada.

[14 : 11] Well, the chap standing beside me was from Dallas, Texas and he stood up and he said I don't believe a word that Bob Phillips said because there ain't no such an animal in Canada. Well, I'm here today to tell you that there is and the reason that we have an evangelical Anglican church in Vancouver is mostly and largely due to the Reverend Harry Robinson.

Harry is known across Canada and in many parts of the United States for the excellent pastoral work that he does. In fact, one of my complaints is when I go to church and he isn't preaching and I find out he's back in Toronto with somebody else's church or out in Oakville or down in Halifax or over in Calgary or something helping somebody else but, you know, we have to be charitable.

When I came here seven and a half years ago about three or four months before the Robinsons and my wife and I came I hate to say it and I don't want to be critical to the people that were here before us but our church was more of a shell than a living organism.

In seven and a half years Harry has taken that church and praise the Lord he's taken that church to where it's an emblem of evangelical Anglicism across Canada and I think it's something that we, all of us in Vancouver can be extremely proud of.

I give you the Reverend Harry Robinson and my good friend Harry. Thank you very much thank you very much for the introduction you may not recognize me but it's mostly because Ken Stevenson insisted I get my hair cut shine my shoes and wear my new suit but this really the when it was referred to St. John Shawnessy United Church by Mr. Phillips it's only that we were told when we were at college that we were to unite all Anglicans and angle for all united so that that was how that all worked out.

[16 : 25] Fran and I as Bob has said have been at St. John's for seven years. I'm a little embarrassed that he called it an evangelical church because that's I think for a lot of people that's a fairly dirty word but I think we've got to live with it so I'm grateful for you letting it all hang out.

the in the course of the next year Fran and I are planning to take a sabbatical having put in seven years at St. John's and we were presented by a friend of ours with a book about New Zealand you know one of those great big coffee table books with lovely pictures of pastoral scenes and mountains and ocean fjords and all the things that excite you and unfortunately instead of just looking at the pictures I read the text and this is what it said about New Zealand it says in looking to the future it's difficult not to ask if New Zealanders can afford to neglect the spiritual side of their faith or perhaps it should be said more correctly the spiritual experience which is the true source of Christian action it's not necessary for all men or for large numbers of men to withdraw into austerity or meditation but there must be at least a sacrificial minority not merely among priests and pastors but also among laity if Christian work in the social services is not to become a ruthless philanthropy no longer sustained by religious faith and in New Zealand where the general desire is for economic security and material satisfaction the environment is unfavorable for any large scale evangel

New Zealanders are so used to collective action as if conscience could be projected into parliament or into churches and councils and committees the people are troubled if they are reminded that religion must be active in solitude as well as in fellowship it's clear what has been done by the churches in social services in their ecumenical programs that the community has deep deep reserves of goodness but these reserves must be replenished and they cannot be renewed solely on the vague and underactive humanitarianism they should be spent without hope of renewal if the emphasis were too heavily placed on the functional life of the churches a merely social organization does not by itself promote or preserve goodness they must also be an inflow of spirit and spirit only lives in the acceptance of suffering and I have to go to New Zealand to discover that the fact of the matter is that it it comes fairly close to I think where we're at in British Columbia

I think we have been evangelistically exploited by ecclesiastical power brokers but I suspect that we lack that profound confrontation between a man and the person of Jesus Christ a man or a woman it's wonderful to me that the names of those who have most profoundly demonstrated the reality of the Christian faith in this century are largely lay people not caught up in the machinery of ecclesiastical survival Scott Peck for instance is a psychiatrist who has written two books the second of them the people of the lie says of his faith he says of his faith in the introduction to this second book now he's introducing the book and this is what he says he said I referred earlier to Jesus as my Lord after many years of vague identification with Buddhist and Islamic mysticism

I ultimately made a firm Christian commitment signified by my non-denominational baptism on the 9th of March 1980 there isn't anything else but non-denominational baptisms but I just wanted to pass that on at the age of 43 long after I had begun working on this book in a manuscript he sent me an author once apologized for his Christian bias I make no such apology Scott Peck said I would hardly have committed myself to something I regard as a bias nor do I desire to disguise my Christian outlook in fact I couldn't my commitment to Christianity is the most important thing in my life and is I hope pervasive and total you can look at the rest of our society and you can see in your own lifetime outstanding

[22 : 01] Christian layman Alexander Solzhenitsyn C.S. Lewis who in his attempt to make Christianity meaningful to soldiers and sailors and airmen during the Second World War wrote a series of broadcast talks which have now come into a book called Mere Christianity which has had the most profound influence on people throughout the English speaking world and it's had that influence because most people in the English speaking world have learned all they know about Christianity by the time they're 12 years old confirmed and graduated from the church and they have never in the course of their life ever looked at what the content of the Christian faith is from the point of view of an adult and Mere Christianity is a book which tries to present Christianity in that way Malcolm Muggeridge the anti-royalist the Marxist at one time the cynic the editor of Punch who came to a profound faith in Christ

Mother Teresa in her ministry to the dying in Calcutta John Vanier in his giving up as a teacher of philosophy at Laval University and going and working as it seems for the rest of his life among mentally retarded people because he found that rather than a university philosophy class among a community of retarded people he found out what it means to be a follower of Jesus it profoundly affected his life you'll remember Leonard Cheshire who was the double VC squadron leader of the Dambuster Squadron the personal representative of Winston Churchill on the plane that carried the Nagasaki bomb and he subsequently saw that life consisted in obedience to and commitment to Jesus Christ and was one of the pioneers in the whole field of palliative care so that's impressive if you look at the men of our century who have made this kind of commitment in their lives that's why

I think that the essential business of the church is to equip Christian men or women to find the reality of faith in Christ that's what it's all about that's what the mission is all about that's the argument that has been initiated and which I hope we're keeping up with the community around us as a church I take great delight in the job that I have simply because it's a matter of being a kind of ringside observer of how God works in people's lives to bring them to faith there was a lovely editorial in the spectator recently written by John Osborne now if you remember him he was the angry young man of the 50s who wrote look back in anger and from being an angry young man in the 50s he's become middle-aged cantankerous and into his third marriage he has a very low view of clergy calling them social workers with their collars on backwards and the probability they should have their pants on backwards too but he's not really unique in that because one of the great strengths of the

Anglican church is that it's geared to get along with incompetent clergymen and because it has recognized for a long time that faith belongs to people well this angry young man finds himself as this editorial indicates occasionally attending evening prayer in his local village church now not always but sometimes such a thing could ruin your whole life his wife would greet him in the middle of a Sunday afternoon when he was comfortably laid back and enjoying the fireside with the question which she shouted to him from the kitchen are you going to talk to God tonight and if he had the boldness to answer yes and went with a feeling of martyrdom and some sense of the holiness of it all to his church and found that the clergyman took the service from the modern version of

Anglican prayer book and read the Bible from something that wasn't the King James version it took all his warm glow of holiness away and he went home angry and he set out at that point to make sure that the liturgy of the prayer book and the literature of the King James version should be maintained in his church not to the normal committee structure was he prepared to work he decided he would do this largely on his own and found that the church required a new roof and so now there is a village church somewhere in England where of a Sunday evening the old prayer book service is said as it has been said since 1662 and the Bible is read in the King James version and there is a roof on the church and a humiliated clergyman at the front well I strongly suspect that that humiliated clergyman will one day see a fairly smug and contented middle aged gentleman in his congregation come to his point of humiliation salvation there was a famous philosopher in

[28 : 20] England in the earlier part of the century called C.E.M. Job and he became a very out a very outspoken atheist and managed to speak for a lot of people and express their unbelief in his book in which he writes which is called the recovery of belief he shows how dangerous it can be attending church he said I even when he said I formed the habit intermittently of attending services in the village church I went out of curiosity I was attracted by the beauty of the setting and the beauty of the liturgy and both of these did indeed have their way with me calming my spirit and preparing me albeit unconsciously for a change of heart until at last they prevailed and after doubt and hesitation I became the diffident and halting Christian

I am today there's a lovely contrast which I want to draw to your attention C.E.M. Job is bearing witness to his conversion to faith in Christ and he refers to himself as a diffident and halting Christian you remember the American whom I quoted later before when he said I make no apology I would hardly have committed myself to something that I would regard as a bias I nor do I desire to disguise my Christian outlook I couldn't be committed to Christianity if it wasn't the most important thing in my life and is I hope pervasive and total well it's somewhat more Anglican to say diffident and halting than it is to make such an outspoken commitment but that's what it's all about and I suspect that there's two reasons that more people in our society are not prepared to make a statement of their personal faith the two reasons are first that I think a great many people do not understand what is the content of the

Christian faith and secondly I don't think people understand how deeply resistant they themselves are to the possibility of it well I want to show you how St. Paul tried to convert a king and this comes in the 26th chapter of the Acts of the apostles it was King Agrippa and it was it's a matter of this mission of ours is similar because we want to present Christ in such a way that people will make a make a verdict about him it takes it sometimes takes months for a trial to be run the jury may be out for days but when the verdict comes it comes in a short time and what a week-long mission is is to give people the opportunity that having put the faith on trial the jury having been out they come to the time for the verdict and the verdict that comes out in this story is the one I want to look you to look at Paul was taken from Jerusalem down to Caesarea

Caesarea was a west west coast city was kind of it was kind of the Ottawa in Judea for civil servants maybe with perks like they get in Hong Kong sometimes but because the Jews would not tolerate the Romans in Jerusalem they had to have a town where they could be themselves Herod the Great built them that town it had a great artificial seaport it had a magnificent hippodrome which is really just a horse racing track and a temple a temple for the worship of the Caesars and it was in this town to this town that Paul was brought under escort he had 200 soldiers 200 spearmen a cavalry regiment of 70 horsemen it was a kind of papal visit without the helicopters and he was taken in chains down to Caesarea it was there in Caesarea that he became one of the local sources of entertainment and when King Agrippa who was king simply because he was he was a

Roman basically with some Jewish blood with some Jewish blood in his veins and he was useful to them and so he was one of the descendants of that Herod that was made famous because of his encounter with the three wise men well Paul was brought before Agrippa Felix who was the governor a successor of Pontius Pilate and Berenice the queen of Agrippa the tribunes and the important men of the city and Paul was brought before them in order to present his argument to them and this was Paul's argument but remember that he's presenting this argument with one thought in mind and that is he wants to convert his hearers he said I am an extremely devout Jew and have been what our 12 tribes hope to attain worshiping night and day I have seen fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus

[34 : 37] Christ why if we have century after century prayed for this look for it seen it prophesied in our scriptures and now that it's happened we deny it why would we behave that way and why would you expect me to behave that way the difficulty of course is the fact that God should raise the dead and that is playing against the rules we know the rules by which our world runs and that goes against them and somebody has said that it's never been possible to fit the resurrection into any world view except the world view of which it is that is the resurrection is the basis and that was Paul's argument all I've done is to be a good Jew if God is God then the impossible is possible and why should I be arrested for believing that then he went on to the authority of his own religious experience which as you know was on the road where he was persecuting Christians he was encountered by the risen Christ by a very bright light by a voice that spoke and by discovering in himself this deep personal resistance to the purpose of God and the reason I tell you that is because I believe that there is not a person who at some level of their conscious and subconscious existence is not aware of either an enormous anger towards God or a bad conscience about God or a tentative feeling that they would like to have faith in God and that that is true for everybody with Paul it was the recognition that he was deeply resisting the purpose of God the risen Christ the bright light the voice all these are parts of human religious experience that could I in our congregation I know that there are people who had that experience who were sitting there Sunday by Sunday well Paul told King Agrippa what his experience was well King Agrippa said in a burst of anger Paul you are mad your great learning is turning you mad well that was his in a sense covering up I think the resistance which he felt in his own heart somebody who's a psychologist has said we stave off inner anxiety by complex arguments that reinforce what we want to believe and that's what what Agrippa did in saying

Paul you are mad that having been done though Paul is now ready in presenting this to Agrippa he's ready for the close if any of you are salesmen you know what I mean it's time to close and Paul says to him I'm telling you the sober truth what's more I'm not telling you anything you don't know the basic facts of the Christian faith are very widely known so that there is not something new that you probably need to be told about them but to be reminded of what you already know about it and that was the argument Paul used in presenting this matter to Agrippa Agrippa turns away from him and says you think it will not take much time to win me over as a Christian and

Paul says much or little I would that you wear even as I am with those words the hearing was over Agrippa and Baranici withdraw along with the governor Felix and when they get into the next room they say this man has done nothing deserving death or imprisonment this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar but what they didn't realize was that in the context of history the thing was entirely the other way around it was not Paul who was on trial it was they who were on trial Paul they thought as he stood there in chains was subject to their judgment these people would be totally lost in the pages of history except for that man who stood before them in chains and bore witness to the reality of the one who had risen from the dead it was they who were on trial and the verdict concerned them and what they were doing that's why you see a parish mission is in a sense holding

Jesus Christ before people and saying what is your verdict and you have all the freedom to give whatever verdict you choose on the basis of the evidence that you've been given on the basis of the things that you already know you have the right to give your verdict but the point is and the thing that I think we so often forget and I guess the thing I want to remind you of as I close is basically in terms of your life in terms of my life it's not Jesus Christ who is on trial it's not Jesus Christ on whom ultimately the verdict must be given but it's our responsibility the chief purpose of this mission is not to tell people what they don't know to remind them of what they do know and to ask them politely to deal with the consequences of that and that's what it's all about and I am overwhelmed by your presence here grateful for all of you frightened to death that I will offend your sensibilities and praying hard that you may be given the grace to hear what I've had to say to commend that which may be helpful and to forgive that which hurt thank you very much you you you you you you you