

Committed to Christ's World

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[0 : 00] Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Well, my thanks to David Short and Dan and to all of you for your very warm and kind welcome to me here at St. John's Shaughnessy and to Vancouver in this year monsoon season.

I think that I can say that since coming to Vancouver, however, and especially since coming to St. John's, I have seen the light. The sun came out yesterday.

Now, it is a very great privilege to be with you this morning, and I hadn't realized just how much of an honor it is to be here and to preach until I read the bulletin and realized that I was going to be given an honorary doctorate. Thank you.

And thank God you didn't make me a bishop. The epiphany season is all about the light of God shining out into the world through Jesus Christ. It is the season of teaching. There is a twofold emphasis to the epiphany season.

[1 : 28] There is the manifestation of the essential divinity of Jesus Christ. And there is the making known of the divine will and purpose for our humanity. The miracle stories of the epiphany season, for instance, at once make known that essential divinity of Christ, but also teach us what God seeks for our humanity. Namely, our being healed and made whole in body and soul and as a community of souls and all for the purpose of our blessedness and delight that is ultimately and only to be found in God himself. But that means, of course, the making known of the disorder and darkness of our own humanity, wounded and broken, sinful and in sad disarray. Consider for a moment the story of the first miracle that Jesus did, as John says, that Jesus did, as John tells us, in Cana of Galilee. And to remember that there,

Mary names the human condition, the human predicament. They, we have no wine, she says. As an old Jewish proverb puts it, without wine, there is no joy. We lack the means of joy and peace, the means of our own sufficiency and our own perfection. It's not something which we have simply in and of ourselves. But Christ provides for us to our own purpose, the way of our own perfection. And He does so by way of explicit reference to the miracle of all miracles, which is the animating principle at work in all of the miracles, the miracle of His hour, which He says has not yet come, for He is referring to the hour of His death and resurrection. All the miracles are about the essential divinity of Jesus Christ made manifest in and through the humanity of Jesus. All the miracles, too, signal something about that divine will for our humanity.

So it means that the light of Epiphany not only reveals God to us, but also reveals us to ourselves in our brokenness and our sinfulness.

And there can really be no healing without that awareness, both individually and collectively. Epiphany makes known for us the true uniqueness of Christ, without which He is not Lord and Savior.

Namely, it is both God and man. Without forsaking what He was, He became what He was not, as Athanasius so wonderfully puts it. And that understanding runs through all of the stories of the Epiphany, it seems to me.

[4 : 52] Behold my only begotten Son, in whom I am well pleased. As we hear the voice of the Father, even as we behold the humanity of Jesus standing in the river Jordan, with the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him, in the account of the baptism of Jesus, one of the stories of the Epiphany.

Indeed, for Eastern Orthodoxy, this is the great story of the Epiphany. For both East and West, I don't mean Nova Scotia and Vancouver, it is a manifestation of the Trinity and Incarnation.

As Herbert puts it, the Herbert whose hymn we just sang twice, Thou hast but two rare cabinets full of treasure, the Trinity and Incarnation.

And Thou hast unlocked them both and made them jewels to betroth the work of Thy creation unto Thyself in everlasting pleasure.

To betroth Mary, the work of Thy creation unto Thyself in everlasting pleasure. Trinity and Incarnation.

[6 : 04] Trinity and Incarnation. But what then are we to make of this story, where Jesus writes with His finger on the ground? What is the epiphany here?

And what is the joy and delight in this story? Oh, I know, some of you are thinking, it's not the light dude, it's the sex, stupid.

Of course, the women get all of the blame. The scribes and the Pharisees brought before Jesus a woman who had been caught in adultery.

It is an extraordinary scene. At once powerful and poignant, at once challenging and disturbing, a scene of incredible violence and of almost indescribable beauty.

The accusers of the woman are really the accusers of Christ. They're using her to get at him. The law, they say, requires adulterers to be stoned.

[7 : 13] What do you say about her, they ask? And this, they said, to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. So we rail against the authority of God.

Why? Because of who Jesus is. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus had healed a man at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath. And that healing excited animosity, not just because it was done on the Sabbath, but because, as John puts it, he called God his own Father, making himself equal to God.

Both what he does and who he is. And these are intimately and closely related. Both what he does and who he is results in his becoming the target.

They sought to kill him, John tells us. And indeed, in the build-up to this story, there is this rising sense of hostility and persecution and even attempts to arrest Jesus.

But in the face of such hostility, what does Jesus do? Well, unlike Socrates, who wrote nothing, Jesus, we are told, did write something.

[8 : 41] Twice, in fact, he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. What did he write? That we do not know.

We only know what he said, as John tells us. First, to the accusers of the woman, and secondly, to the woman herself. And what an epiphany it is.

You see, it is an epiphany of the forgiveness of sins. Which alone sets love in order. *Ordinati in me caritatum.*

The song of song says, Set love in order in me. What a wonderful phrase. And I think it is the great maxim for the pastoral ministry of the church.

The real meaning of the cure of souls. And it has, it seems to me, its greatest illustration precisely in this gospel scene. And we neglect it at our peril.

[9 : 48] You see, we too, you and me, are in this story. We are in this story as adulterers and idolaters, as sinners who in one way or another are caught in the never-ending web of deceit and self-righteousness, of delusion and folly.

Adultery encapsulates all of the forms of immorality and sexual confusion in act and imagination and all the things that belong to the confusions of our contemporary pornographic culture.

And it is really a form of idolatry. It's about the worship of ourselves as sexual beings and the priority given to immediate self-gratification.

which, though admitting of a certain quality of mutuality, is actually about using one another. As are Nafisi's remarkable book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, acutely observes that Nabokov's novel *Lolita* is really about the usurpation of another's personality.

In using one another, we abuse one another. Such things belong, in other words, to the grand refusal to subordinate our loves to the love of God and to bring that divine love to bear upon our relations with one another, whether within or without marriage.

[11 : 31] And we are all, I suspect, in one way or another, complicit in the moral and sexual confusions of our day. Let Him, who is without sin, cast the first stone.

We are all in need of God's redeeming and transforming grace. Look at all the lonely people.

But are we to suppose that sex is the answer any more than that money is the answer to the sad parade of human misery? Is that what the good life means, let alone a holy life?

Only in a culture of despair. Only in a culture of arrested adolescence. The lay theologian and writer Charles Williams comments upon Paolo and Francesca, the adulterous lovers in the inferno of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, that while their sin formally was adultery, their real failing was the failure to be mature in love.

And that, you see, is a denial, too, of the call to holiness. This is, I think, the struggle of our age.

[13 : 03] The challenge is about our maturing in love, in seeking what belongs to the good of one another, patiently and prayerfully, humbly, and with deep compassion.

Transhumanar. No, it's not a funny word from the East. Transhumanized. Dante puts it. Coining a word in Italian to capture the principle of the spiritual and moral life of Christians.

St. Paul puts it this way. Be not conformed to the world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds. And it means growing up into holiness through the hope of transformation.

God's grace working in us more than we can ever imagine or think. And it happens in and through the struggles of our lives, necessarily and inescapably.

In Mozart's *Magic Flute*, Camino falls in love with Pamina simply by seeing her portrait. And she, in turn, falls in love with him simply by hearing about him.

[14 : 23] But this will not do. So the interest in the opera is not in that immediate self-gratification, that moment of infatuation, but rather in the trials of grace and virtue against the forces of darkness and vice that ultimately will make them worthy of each other.

There is, we might say, a growing up in love. And there is even a growing up in love for those little comic characters, Papageno and his little Papagena.

The accusers of the woman in this story are the accusers of Christ. And theirs is the folly of self-righteousness, which supposes that they are somehow immune from certain sins, especially the sins of the flesh, while being guilty, of course, of pride and conceit, the sins of the idolatry of ourselves simply in another way.

They assert the law against others while ignoring how they, too, are subject to the law. In so doing, the scribes and the Pharisees here are the betrayers of the letter and the spirit of the law.

They assert the letter of the law, but for a purpose that is other than the law itself. They want to use the law as a cudgel to get at someone else, Jesus, while excusing themselves.

[15 : 55] Now, it should be a great comfort to lawyers to know that Jesus is the great lawyer. At times, he even outlaws the lawyers.

That makes theologians and priests happy. Here, the scribes and Pharisees seek to trick him into denying the law of Moses. He, in turn, replies by confronting them with the law in its profounder sense and meaning.

Let him who is without sin throw the first stone. You see, the law convicts us all. The mercy is to know that.

They would stone the woman and they would stone Jesus. That's what we do. And in the face of such animosity, he writes in the dust and speaks these words and then once more.

He bends down and writes with his finger on the ground. But when they heard his words, they went away one by one, just falling away.

[17 : 13] And Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Now, he had stood up to confront these accusers. There was only his statement to them.

Then there was their withdrawing from his presence in silence. Here, he is still on his knees.

And here, he looks up and says to her, has no one condemned you? And then there is a dialogue and exchange. No one, Lord, she says.

Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more, he says. Though my sins against me cried, thou didst hear me.

And when alone, they did reply, thou didst clear me. There can be no greater contrast than between the condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees and the gentle yet firm compassion of Christ towards this woman.

[18 : 30] His words and his actions, bending down and writing with his finger on the ground, are an epiphany of the forgiveness of sins, that great distinctive of the Christian faith. In the very place where the fingers of accusation, the stones of condemnation, are seen and felt, a scene of violence, there Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

And while what he wrote might seem to be one of the great mysteries of all time, it's actually the case that, in a way, the whole life of Christ is really about how the story of God is written in the very dust of our humanity.

And so, too, it must be written in the very dust of our lives. You see, the mystery lies in what has been revealed. And we are in the place of the accusers and the woman in this story.

And Christ is on his knees riding with his finger on the ground, kneeling before us in our sinfulness and praying there for our forgiveness, for mine and for yours.

There is something deeply moving about this scene. How shall we respond? Will we slink away?

[20 : 08] Troubled in our consciences, perhaps, but still unrepentant of our thoughts and words and deeds? Or will we stay to hear Christ's gentle yet firm words, Go and sin no more.

Go and grow in love. Let us pray. O God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright, grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations.

through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.