

“Behold I make all things New”:
The Anglican Church of Canada in Transformation

**An Address given at Convocation to the Graduating Students of Montreal Diocesan
Theological College
by The Right Reverend Dennis Paul Drainville**

My Lord Bishop, Members of the Governing Board, Principal Simons, Esteemed Members of the Academic Faculty and My Sisters and Brothers in Christ, I feel honour bound to acknowledge the kindness and generosity of The Members of the Governing Board in recommending my name for this honour. Although, I am now a passionate believer in learning, my time spent in the august halls of Trinity College so many years ago, might not be seen by many as the most academically fruitful, nor would I be a good example of serious book learning. That being said, Life has taught me the value and grace that are the fruits of academic discipline and it is possible, I have learned, to appreciate those attributes even though we don't ourselves possess them.

On hearing of the honour being made, my very strange sense of humour led me to think that the Governing Board of Dio were putting my name forward as a testament to symmetry. After all, when I have shuffled off this mortal coil, how many people will be able to claim, as I can, that my name, linked to this honour, is the very apogee of symmetry. For on my grave stone will be written for all the world to see DDDD. In my opinion it adds a certain “je ne sais quoi!”

As we read the reports from the Council of General Synod and scan the articles of the religious press across Canada we have sufficient proof that our Anglican Church is undergoing massive change, restructuring and a process of fundamental realignment. One might think reading these articles that the major issues that concern us are declining numbers and lack of financial resources. My view is quite different. I believe that the Anglican Church of Canada is facing a far more challenging problem. Over the last fifty years we have lost our ability to communicate the Faith to the succeeding generations and as those people have not been taught or mentored in the Faith, they

have drifted away or rejected the Anglican Church. The result is that we no longer have the critical mass of Anglicans who choose to believe or are interested in supporting the present church community.

Understanding how this diminishment in the numbers of Anglican Christians has happened is important. As many would acknowledge, we live in a post Christian Age. The members of contemporary society, by and large, believe that they know what the Christian Faith is all about. They have received their understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ from television, movies, the internet, political commentaries and from observing individual Christians whom they know. In reality, what our contemporaries have rejected is a mere distorted image, the vestiges, the bits and pieces which make up the sum total of what is understood to be the Christian faith, but is not. That image is more a creation of pop culture than it is an expression of serious religious experience or belief.

However, my concern this evening is not with the great masses of people who believe they know or understand what constitutes the Christian Faith and reject it. No, rather, my focus is on us, the Household of Faith, the women and men who for a variety of reasons and in a myriad of ways consciously are trying to follow the Way of Jesus the Risen Lord. And yet, what makes grappling with this issue complicated is that we too are part of post Christian society. From what I observe, we seem to be no more immune to the effects of pop culture on the Christian Faith than our contemporaries who seemingly claim knowledge and render a decision to reject the faith. Unfortunately, we contemporary Christians think we know the basic tenets of Faith and have appropriated a sense of the story of Jesus within ourselves individually and collectively, but in fact, we too have lost much of the story. The clearest and most striking example that proves the point is found in the empty pews of our churches. The story of Jesus no longer seems to hold power even for us who claim to be believers.

To put it another way, we have forgotten how to be a Christian community. For if there is one attribute that has been constant in our life of Faith over the past generations it has been our knowledge of how to train and educate the next generation of believers in the

Gospel message. The Church has changed countless times in countless places over the past two thousand years. Relating to contemporary culture has been a constant engagement in our history as Church. We have reformed, realigned, and renewed in many different situations according to the society that we are part of and according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We are in such a time now. I believe that the Church that will emerge from the present crisis will be fundamentally different from the institution that we now know and of which we are members.

However, we must not conclude that the decline in numbers is a rejection of Jesus Christ, for a true rejection can only happen if there is a real meeting. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that, as we have lost our capacity to understand, share and teach the Word of Life, contemporary members of society no longer are either able to comprehend what it is that we truly believe or are not interested in what the Anglican Church seems to offer. St. Paul wrote in Romans about the importance of how we communicate the Good news: "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one in whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news". For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" So Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard, comes through the word of Christ." Romans 10:14-17

To illustrate this problem I have set out three vignettes or stories that reveal the challenges we are presently facing. They are true stories although they are put together from many different anecdotes and places in Canada.

Vignettes of the Contemporary Church

Vignette One

An individual who I will call Joan 34 has sought an interview with the bishop regarding possible ordination in the Church. Joan arrives with a C.V. in hand and ready to initiate

her career as a future member of the clergy. Joan is quite clear that God has called her to ordination. She already has a degree from university and has worked for a number of years and is clear that her professional and educational qualifications are adequate to the job requirements. In conversation with the bishop the following observations are made: Firstly, that neither Joan nor her family come from a church background, and she has been a regular attender at church for only about a year. Secondly, on hearing that ordination is a lengthy process and includes several procedural and formational steps including: studies leading to another diploma, interviews and discussions with church members, a police check and psychological testing; Joan responds that she thinks such a process is unnecessary as God has most certainly called her and surely the process needn't be so long and convoluted. Many people from her parish have affirmed her education and gifts and have said clearly that ordination is the most natural thing for her. Thirdly, in discussion with Joan it is apparent that she has very little knowledge of prayer, the bible or experience of leadership in the parish that she has only recently joined.

Vignette Two

Several parishioners have been vociferous in recommending that it is time for a Confirmation Class in their parish. Several things puzzle the new cleric who has been in the local community less than a year. Firstly, the request for the Confirmation Class is not being made by the parents of the young people or by the young people themselves, but rather by the grandparents. Secondly, when the young cleric tries to engage with the parents about the process leading to the setting up of the class, she finds that she has not met and therefore doesn't really know most of the parents as they rarely enter the doors of the Church. Except for one particular child, who is at Church every Sunday with his parents, the other nine young people, like their parents, are not Church goers. Thirdly, the classes are hugely challenging for the young cleric because she finds that there is little or no interest or commitment to being part of the class. She also has found that the young people are largely uninformed about bible stories or prayer because those things are not at all part of the lives that they live, and because they are not attending Church, they have no point of convergence with the life of Faith as it is

traditionally understood.

Vignette Three

All Saints Church is one of five congregations in a fairly large rural parish. The ten members who gather every week are all in their 70's or 80's. They love their charming wooden neo-gothic church building which seats about one hundred and was built in 1890. Unfortunately, the building is in significant disrepair. The bell tower, the roof and the foundation in the N.E. corner need immediate and costly repair. The two neighbouring churches, St Peter's Church with 15 members and ten minutes away, and St. John's Church with 12 members and twenty minutes away, have offered to open their doors to them. Both of these churches, although not large in numbers, are in significantly better repair. Unfortunately, All Saints has other problems as well, they can no longer afford to pay their bills. The congregation has informed the diocesan office that they can no longer afford to pay the diocesan assessment or the stipend and benefits for their incumbent priest. They will, however, try to pay their insurance costs, because it is necessary to keep the church open. The bishop meeting with them asks what they believe their mission is to the local community, to which there is little response. He then asks what they want from their church. They reply that they want to keep their church open, their services from the BCP and regular visits from the parish priest. The bishop gently suggests that although on the surface it looks like the congregation wants the same things that they have always had, there is one significant difference, they no longer have the financial and human resources to keep going as they have for over one hundred years. When asked why they will not join one of the other churches in the area where they would have the advantages of more resources, greater participation and less demand being made on them individually and collectively, they reply through the treasurer that they know they are dying as a congregation but it is to them of primary importance that the church stay- open so that they can be buried from it. Obviously, when they are all gone it won't matter anymore.

Now what do all three of these vignettes have in common? All three vignettes reveal a lack of clarity among the individuals about what is appropriate for them to be and do

within the context of the Christian community. In the first example Joan barely knows what it means to be a Christian and there she is, convinced that whatever it takes, she has the capacity to be a leader. In the second story the grandparents are locked into a dream of the past and how the community operated in their youth. They do not really see that their own children have, by and large rejected lives of Faith as well as rejecting being members of the church community. In the third vignette the small congregation doesn't see that what they are advocating is the opposite of what Christ has offered. In the scriptures Jesus offers those who believe abundant life not abundant death.

Another issue which is brought to light through each vignette is the disappearance of the Christian as "disciple" or learner. Increasingly those who are coming to faith are people who have little or no knowledge of the Christian Story. Whether it is Joan who has only recently joined a church community, or the parents and children to be confirmed, who never attend church and are ignorant about issues of faith, or the few members of All Saints Church who reject the kind and generous offer to share a church and live together in community but opt rather for separation and death because of a their mistaken obsession with their church building; all of them have stopped living the life of a disciple and have adopted other ways of relating to the church.

Finally all three vignettes reveal the slide into a negative focus based upon the question, "what can the church do for me? Joan wanted a job. She believes that her diploma and work experience and the supportive words of others are all that one needs to be ordained. After all that's how everyone else gets a job, isn't it? The grandparents, for their part are hoping that by forcing their grandchildren to be confirmed that they will achieve a small bit of success to mollify themselves for feeling that they have been so unsuccessful with their own children. This of course is based on their own feelings and perceptions of failure. Finally, the people from All Saints want to be buried from their own church, and that church only. It is as if the final act of burial will prove their undying commitment to the building their ancestors built and to a way of life that they were raised to value. They little think that perhaps their commitment might be somewhat misplaced.

The challenge that the Anglican Church has in many communities across Canada is not

primarily financial, demographic or based upon competition with other churches, religions or secular society. I believe the real issue is: that we have forgotten how to be the Church. This disabling forgetfulness can be demonstrated by observing three important areas of our communal life: first, we have not maintained a focus on our individual and collective relationships with Jesus Christ, second, we have lost our identity because we are not taught the elements of Faith as disciples or learners of Jesus have been taught since time immemorial, and third because we do not know or live out the story of our Faith, we are not able to be effective instruments of God's mission in the world. The Church of which we are now members is living with the results of these losses.

Living with and Knowing Jesus the Risen Lord

To appreciate more fully what I am saying let us turn briefly to the questions that are asked at baptism following the reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant. These questions put squarely before us three central issues that are absolutely necessary for the building of Christian community: a relationship with Jesus the Risen Lord, a clear sense of our identity as Christians and an unwavering commitment to God's mission in the world.

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

I think these questions fairly clearly chart out the life that we are to live as baptized

members of the Body of Christ. Jesus Christ is central to each commitment. Following the Apostle's teaching will help to guide and direct us in our communal life in Christ. Through our openness to learn we become true disciples of Jesus, for after all, the word disciple comes from latin and means learner. Therefore, being a disciple means being a learner. Gathering together in fellowship, links our lives together bonding us to Christ and with one another and helps us to grow in the Faith as we actively become one in the Spirit. Through the breaking of the bread we not only spiritually sustain ourselves so that we may do God's work but we re-enact over and over again, through the sharing of the bread and wine, the ritual coming together of the disciples, whose sole object was to focus on His presence and receive the benefits of being in communion with His life. It is through prayer, regular, focused and heartfelt that we allow Jesus access into our most inward thoughts, hopes and aspirations

Living in Christ through Christ and with Christ, is the aim. But nowhere does it say that this way of life is easy or even attractive to contemporary people. Those who choose Christ are truly choosing, "the road less traveled". They are engaged in a counter cultural movement that fundamentally rejects the violence, materiality and shallowness of the present age. And yet because we are *in* the world it is so easy to be led to do those things that negate the call to Christ. Not only must we resist evil, but we must be ready to analyze our own lives and submit ourselves to the call to repentance.

As Anglicans we have often found proclaiming the Gospel a major challenge. We have often avoided the word evangelism and felt that it was better left to those who were more fundamentalist or radically protestant. Despite this, the biblical record is replete with exhortations regarding the centrality of "baptizing", "making disciples", and "preaching the Good News". Surely, considering the world we live in, the number of crises and catastrophes that presently face the world and the obvious need for Christ to be proclaimed, we can no longer see this as a secondary engagement.

I am often reminded when I read the words, "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons," of St. Francis who captured the essence of the gift of showing love. When we allow ourselves to be used by God as instruments of love, what better, clearer, simpler

communication needs to be made. In one and the same act we draw someone into God's embrace and we are drawn inward into the very act whereby Jesus has reconciled the world to himself. We become as it were the enfleshment of the "new commandment".

Justice and Peace. In the Western world these terms are often used by people to denote their dissatisfaction with governmental policy or antagonism to the various ruling elites. But speaking of Justice and Peace in lands where Genocide has occurred or is occurring, where hundreds of millions are homeless and without clean water, where the grief stricken faces of family members can be seen watching as their loved ones die for want of medications that cost a few pennies, this is a different order of reality and must call from us a real response. This is the test of our resolve as Christians: that given the vision of a world based on Justice and Peace, you and I willingly and intentionally choose to be the vehicle for God to bless the many. The miracle is that we must do it one person at a time for every human is worthy of dignity and respect.

Who are we? The Issue of Identity

There are many passages in scripture which are good responses to the question, What is our identity as Christians in contemporary society? In my view, this question is most completely answered in the 28th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. It is often called the Great Commission.

And Jesus came and said to them, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ***Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*** And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In the early 1980's I had the pleasure of meeting and getting to know the Rev. Bob Brow who at that time was serving the parish of St. James in Kingston Ontario. He was a well known Evangelical cleric and I had come from the Anglo Catholic part of the Anglican

Church. Despite our very different approaches to things theological and ecclesiological, we both enjoyed discussion, debate and the sharing of ideas. He was ministering right at the foot of Queen's University and almost daily entering into a teaching relationship with the many students that would cross his path. I was amazed and impressed at how intentional he was at presenting the Faith to people who came from secular, atheistic or other religious traditions.

Bob wrote a book entitled "***Go Make Learners: A New Model for Discipleship in the Church***". This book was a revelation to me because the model of discipleship that he put forward made intrinsic sense and corresponded to my understanding of the scriptures. He put forward the view that it was when we are learners being taught the Faith that we were being most true to our call. As in all models, it is not perfect in all its points. But I believe it is a very helpful approach as we attempt to grapple with the challenge of passing on the Faith to the next generations.

The central issue of the discipleship model as Bob Brow outlines in his book is simply the making of disciples or learners. It is this activity which is the primary work of the Church and the dynamic force that draws people into a relationship with Jesus so that they receive the gifts and other benefits that come from being taught by and about the Word of Life.

The Book of Acts is a key document in the demonstration of how this is a central approach in helping the Church be the Church. The author of Luke /Acts highlights the teaching ministry of the Early Church mentioning the word teach or teaching over 20 times. In Acts 2:42 we find the passage that has been incorporated into questions following the Baptismal covenant: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers". So, we are to primarily be learners. This is a good thing, because from the stand point of someone who is seeking to know God's will and is endeavouring to do the things that God is calling us to do, it is nice to know that we don't have to be an expert, or possess secret knowledge, or belong to the right family or even be of a certain race. All we need is to believe in the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, have an open and inquiring mind and be baptized.

It seems clear to me that baptism was the means by which the new believers would become enrolled as learners. This entry into discipleship required the public taking of oaths and the ritualized washing away of sins as a sign of entry into the new relationship or new life. As Bob Brow quite rightly points out, "What is striking about the early churches described in the Book of Acts is that they seemed to take in anybody! Since all baptisms were immediate, there was obviously no time to investigate the new disciples, no probationary period to weed out the good from the bad. Disciples were baptized first and then taught. This was certainly the case for with Jesus' first twelve disciples."

I would say that this openness toward baptism and the enrolling of learners or disciples makes sense when seen in relation to the charge of the Pharisees that Jesus spent too much time with tax collectors, prostitutes and the ritually unclean. He in fact called all persons into a relationship of learning. To know him was to know the Father or to learn of the Father. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.'" John 6:44-45 The role of the Holy Spirit as teacher is also attested to by Jesus in John's Gospel: I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I said to you." John 14:25-26 So it seems to me that if we would understand most clearly who we are, we must acknowledge that our identity is inextricably tied to the call to be a disciple or a learner.

An unwavering commitment to God's mission in the world.

Thus far we have spoken about knowing and living in a relationship with Jesus our Risen Lord and we have examined our primary identity as Disciples or Learners. The third element that we must consider is our commitment to God's Mission in the world. That Mission has already been touched on previously. We, the disciples of Jesus have been commanded to go into the world and make other disciples. We do this firstly

because we have been commanded to do so by Our Lord. However, we also do it because it has been demonstrated over two thousand years, that by engaging persons in such a relationship with Jesus, that lives will be changed. Not only the individual lives of those seeking to know God but the lives of many others who live close to those who have become learners.

Three examples of how we can advance God's Mission seem obvious: We must leave our church buildings and meet people wherever they are. We must communicate with everyone we meet in the language they understand and talk about issues and concerns that are real to them. And we must pay special attention in our working out of God's mission to respond to the poor, the marginal, the homeless and hungry and those who are rejected by society.

For years Anglicans have spoken about an "open door" policy. That everyone is invited to share worship in their church and that if any person is searching for God they will be most welcome. Most people have not taken up the offer because it was not clearly put and because the very building that is so important to the members of the Anglican Church is often viewed as a fortress within which prayers and rituals go on which neither attract the individual seeker nor do they provide a point of convergence that might bridge the gap and make communication happen. The person feels like an "outsider" and the building only underlines that reality.

The fact is people are not **in** the church building they are in the streets, in the coffee shops, at the mall, in grocery stores, in the workplace and in their homes (if they have a home.) How can we make disciples if we sit waiting in our empty churches. Surely their very emptiness is in itself an indication that we had better take our mission to where the people are and reconsider the vocation of the building.

Church communities are a mystery to most people. They are a mystery partly because what seems so obvious to us about our prayers and rituals doesn't make obvious sense to the uninitiated. The language of the scriptures and the theological concepts that we use are also confusing to people who have not been taught. We Anglicans often

assume that people who attend our services find the liturgy straight forward and clear and we seem surprised when they never return. Just as Jesus spoke simply and in parables we must learn to communicate with everyone we meet in the language they understand.

If a person has been out of a job for six months and doesn't know where his next meal is coming from, he is not familiar with nor does he probably care about the sexuality debate going on in the Anglican Communion. What needs to be communicated is the desire of Our Lord that he be supported and treated with respect and dignity. The Christian Scriptures are full of stories about how Jesus entered into the lives of total strangers and responded to the real needs and fears with which they lived.

However our mission is secondarily also to care for those whom we know. When we make a phone call to our neighbour who is going through cancer treatments, we are ministering. When we take the time to read with a child in our community, we are ministering. When we drive people to appointments, organize a potluck to bring people together, help individuals wade through government paper-work, or be a companion through grief, we are ministering. All of these activities are part of God's Mission and almost all of them happen outside the church building.

An important part of God's Mission is what has been called the preferential option for the poor. We continue to live in a society that is divided between those who have and those who do not have. A close reading of any of the Christian Scriptures clearly shows that Jesus advocated for the poor, the dispossessed, the sick and the outcast and also believed that righteousness called us to live in relationships of justice and peace. We must see such engagement as central to what God is calling us to be and to do.

In a world where there is little peace and where justice is rarely made manifest, we are challenged as Jesus' disciples to work actively to bring in the reign of God. This means not only using our resources to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, but to challenge those in power to do justice while living in relationships of solidarity with those considered marginal.

We also live in a society that is struggling with its fundamental values. Out of control

consumerism and a pace of life whipped on by exploding technology camouflage voids of loneliness, frustration and futility. We live in a milieu of confusion and conflict. In the midst of such a society people yearn to be in community with others, but often don't know how or where it is found. In reality I believe people are looking for faith, hope and love. They are more precisely looking for someone who knows them to their core, and yet forgives them and continues to love them.

I believe they are looking for Jesus. We who know Him must now learn how to share Him. It is not enough to sit in our empty churches and wait for people to come to us. No. We are the Body of Christ. We are the physical manifestation of Jesus in the world. It is up to us, His disciples, the learners who have sat at His feet and now must go out into the world and help others to make connections so that those who are called to be in relationship with Jesus, receive the greatest of gifts: the opportunity to meet Him and to know Him, and to live with Him.

I conclude with a poem by James Wreford*:

From hearts hard as the ground
bleak as the wintry sky
still as the stilly ice
comes up the human cry.

We from our hunger call
for Heaven's sustaining grace:
but what should draw Heaven's love to earth
to save the mortal race?

Though we in blindness seek
His light to mend our loss:
what is there in our worthlessness
should bring him to the cross?

What is there in our shame
our doubt, our disbelief
to bind His head with thorns
His heart with human grief?

And yet He loves and will
with an unswerving care
take on the cure of all our wrong
and all our sorrows bear.

O surely this is love,
not that we cry His name,
but that, unloved, He loved us still,
and still unloved, He came.

Let us hope and pray brothers and sisters that we have the creativity, the courage, and
the love, to take up this great challenge.

*A former Chief Geographer of Canada and the winner of the Governor General's Award for
poetry in 1950