

Christian Identity in a Secular Age

Address to the Convocation of the Montreal Diocesan Theological College

May 9, 2011

1 Peter 2:9 &10

Bishop Barry, Principal Simons, faculty colleagues, graduates, family and friends of the graduates, chers amis: let me begin by acknowledging that it is a privilege to address the convocation of the Montreal Diocesan Theological College. As Director of the Montreal School of Theology I bring greetings from the other colleges on the street.

In particular, I should like to congratulate those whose achievements we celebrate here tonight: Robert Camara and Rhonda Waters. It has been a pleasure to teach you, to get to know you, and I want to thank you for your contribution to our ecumenical community of faith and learning. This is a significant moment in your life. Your graduation from this College, together with your ordination to the diaconate and the priesthood, will mark your identity and your vocation; it will shape who you are and what you are called to be and to do.

But you are being called to live out your identity and vocation at a particular time and in a particular place; and that is the challenge about which I'd like to speak briefly this evening. I begin with a story, recounted by the Leith Anderson in his book *Dying for Change*.¹ It's a story about a Soviet cosmonaut in the late 1980s named Sergei Krikalev.

As Anderson tells it Sergei Krikalev knew who he was. He was a highly privileged Soviet cosmonaut. He had "convictions, stability, success, fame, and fortune. He was a member of the Communist Party, a citizen of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and a follower of Soviet President Michal Gorbachev...He lived in Leningrad and he earned a lucrative 500 rubles a month." But in 1991 everything changed for Krikalev. In April of that year he "was launched into space to orbit the earth for four months." While he was in orbit, however, huge changes occurred. The nation he had left behind collapsed. As a result, the Soviet space agency was in disarray. "More frightening, however, was the failure of the technical system that was to bring the cosmonaut back to earth. With no means of returning to earth, Krikalev had to stay in orbit for a total of ten months...Imagine how he must have felt when he finally came home and stepped on solid ground for the first time in nearly a year." He was, without a doubt, relieved to be home safely. But home was not the same. His country no longer existed. "Michal Gorbachev had been replaced by a previously marginal politician named Boris Yeltsin," who had become president of the new nation of Russia. The Communist Party was out of power and disrepute. "Krikalev's hometown of Leningrad had been renamed St. Petersburg. His 500 ruble salary, significantly reduced by inflation, could now barely buy a hamburger at the local McDonald's. Krikalev must have felt an incredible sense of disorientation. He must have wondered where he was, who he was, whose he was, and what he ought to do. How was he going to live his life in this strange new world within which he found himself?"²

¹ Leith Anderson, *Winning the Values War in a Changing Culture*, Bethany House, 1994, 11-12.

² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

Being a priest, pastor, minister, and church leader in our time often feels a lot like that. The church is, as we all know, experiencing an incredible sense of disorientation and dislocation in a rapidly changing culture. In his presidential address to the American Society of Church History a few years ago Mark Noll asked “Whatever Happened to Christian Canada?” Suddenly, he argues, Quebec and Canada in the 1960s moved from being a distinctly “Christian” nation to a decidedly secular one.³ Canada’s once-mighty Roman Catholic and Protestant churches experienced a dramatic reversal. The change is basically summed up in a scene in Denys Arcand’s award-winning comedy-drama, *les Invasions barbares*. An aging priest laments what happened to Christianity in Quebec: “In 1966 all the churches emptied out in a few weeks. No one can figure out why.”

Those of us engaged in church leadership feel these changes acutely. Those of you who graduate tonight will face challenges in ministry that we hardly imagined when I graduated thirty years ago. Things are not the way they used to be, and we ought to be asking hard questions about where we are, who we are, whose we are, and what we ought to be - and become - and do, in our time. But as we ask those questions, and as we deal with the challenges, let’s remember that we are not the first people of faith to feel this way. And we certainly won’t be the last.

In the text that was read earlier, 1 Peter 2, we hear about small marginalized communities of faith that were struggling to come to terms with faith and life in the midst of challenging times. This letter was written to a group of Christians, and their leaders, who lived in Asia Minor, around the Mediterranean basin, mostly in what is now part of modern Turkey. They lived and moved and had their being every day as residents of regions like Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. They were a diverse group with multiple identities: women and men, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor. But they had one thing in common: they had become followers of God’s crucified Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. They had confessed him as Lord, and through his life, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension, their lives had been transformed. They were citizens of the empire, to be sure, but they had an identity centered in Jesus Christ. As people of faith they were sometimes discouraged, sometimes disillusioned, and sometimes disoriented. Their leaders no doubt felt as if they both belonged – and didn’t belong – at one and the same time. They lived, to use Augustine’s language, in both the “City of God” and the “City of Man.”

If faced with writing a letter to these churches today we might be tempted to offer up all kinds of practical advice. That’s why our shelves are filled with books like twelve steps to successful Christian ministry; or ten ways to grow a church; or the seven habits of highly effective leaders. But in the midst of this situation, 1 Peter does not dish up pious platitudes, strategic plans, innovative programs, or revised mission statements. Something more important is happening here. These readers are reminded who they are, and whose they are.

³ Mark Noll, *Whatever Happened to Christian Canada?* Regent Publishing, 2007.

With words that reflect the richness of the imagery of the Hebrew Bible, the text says they are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. Once they were not a people, but now they are a people: their identity is rooted in God. They had received mercy, they had received a gift, a gift that had not simply changed their lives, but had given them new life. This new life in Christ made them who they were. They didn't do anything to earn this. By grace, God had called them to participate in Christ. Their identity as God's people, therefore, had nothing to do with what they had done – or not done – and everything to do with what God had done – and was doing – in their midst. It was not about them – it was about God – and God's saving purposes in the world – the mission of God - into which they had been incorporated. Their identity as God's people threw them back out into God's world as people of faith, hope, and love.

The church in the western world, many argue, is going through a kind of an "identity crisis." Some people describe our time as post-Christian, or post-Christendom, or postmodern in order to get at this. The church, it is argued, is in exile; people of faith are described as "resident aliens."⁴

In Quebec, of course, the issue of identity is constantly on the political and social radar screen. Every day when I get off the train I walk from the Bell Center to the university campus and I know that I am an Anglophone in a francophone culture; a Protestant in an historically Catholic society; a Christian in an increasingly religiously pluralistic world; and perhaps most depressingly – a Toronto Maple Leafs fan in Habs territory. We live in a vibrant city in which the Christian movement finds itself amidst a mixture of languages, cultures, creeds, and aspirations. What is the church called to be and to do in this context?

Perhaps the most important analysis for church leaders in Quebec and Canada is the recent book by McGill philosopher Charles Taylor who describes our time as "A Secular Age." Western culture, he says, is not simply characterized by a decline of certain beliefs and institutions; it is characterized by a total change in our experience of the world. We have moved, he argues, "from a world in which unbelief was virtually impossible, to a world in which it is easy, even inescapable." Faith is now one option among many, and an embattled one at that.⁵

But a secular age, argues Taylor, is not one in which faith disappears altogether. It is one in which people of Christian faith, people of other religious faiths, and people of no religious faith at all must learn to live together for the common good. In fact, many contemporary secular thinkers, such as Jurgen Habermas, argue "that religion is important in the modern world, because it helps forge bonds of solidarity between people."⁶

⁴ See for example the work of Douglas John Hall or Stanley Hauerwas or William Willimon.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007)

⁶ Jurgen Habermas, "A Reply," *What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Malden, MA: Polity 2010), 72-83.

At such a time, and in such circumstances, therefore, it is important for Christian leaders to know who they are and what they have been called to do. In the midst of anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity, we may be tempted to shrink back from the world, and lash out in fear. Or we may be tempted to think that a wholesale revision of the gospel is in order to accommodate Christianity's new cultured despisers. None of these responses, so evident today in the churches of Canada – mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Roman Catholic, will get us very far.

In his book *Exclusion and Embrace* Yale theologian Miroslav Volf argues that we do not live out Christian identity by retreating inward, or by lashing outward, but by participating in God's identity as God's people. When we see ourselves as having been incorporated into the self-giving love of the triune God; as having been embraced by the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross; as having been welcomed by the open arms of a parent receiving a prodigal: then we know we belong.⁷

We know that God has made room for us, and we thereby make room for others. Our identity is not in or for us – it is in and for the other. That's the beginning of a theological understanding of ministry in a secular age. Ministry begins when we understand that we have been incorporated into the mission of God; that the church of God does not have a mission; but rather that the God of mission has a church. That God has a people, a priesthood, of which we are privileged to be a part. It's not about us; it is about God's redemptive purposes for creation; God's will for human flourishing; God's mercy – that we may proclaim the mighty acts of God who called us out of darkness into God's marvelous light.

In his sweeping epic novel *In The Beauty of the Lilies* the American writer John Updike says that "Faith is a force of will whereby a Christian defines him (or herself) against the temptations of an age. Each age presents its own competing philosophies...Skepticism and mockery surrounded the first apostles...Christ risen was no more embraced by Paul and his listeners than by modern skeptics. The stumbling blocks have never dissolved. The scandal has never lessened."⁸

It is that kind of faith that sustains us in ministry during times of disillusionment, discouragement, and disorientation. Such faith enables us to trust in God even when it appears the church is more often than not on the losing side. One of my favourite stories is about the worst defeat suffered by any team in the history of sport. It happened during a college football game in the 1930s. Cumberland College lost this particular game by a score of 222 to 0. After about three quarters of the game, when the score had begun to mount, and the team was dramatically demoralized, there came a moment in one of the few plays when Cumberland College had the ball, that the ball was snapped back to the quarterback, who immediately fumbled it. The opposing linesmen came charging in, the ball was trickling around in the backfield, and quarterback screamed to the half-back: "Pick up the ball and run with it." The halfback, a scrawny freshman, looked down at the

⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 17, 29.

⁸ John Updike, *In The Beauty of the Lilies*, Ballantine Books, 1997. Chapter One.

ball, and then took one look at the hulking lineman who was charging at him, and he said to the quarterback: “You pick it up, stupid. You dropped it.”⁹

That’s how many people feel about the church today. Someone has fumbled the ball. Let someone else pick up the church. Let someone else run with it. And if the church is nothing more than a quaint gathering of religiously minded folks who share a similar culture, at sea in a rapidly changing context, they probably have every right to feel that way. But tonight, as you graduate, you are being invited to pick up the ball and run with it. You are being invited to lead the church to be the church.

Dale Woods recently put me onto a story in a book called *If You Know Who You Are You’ll Know What To Do*. The title is somewhat provocative but in the introduction the author tells the story of Hendrik Kraemer who was a lay missionary with the Dutch Reformed church and spent much of his life in Indonesia. He was in his native Holland when the Second World War broke out. He, along with others, watched as their Jewish neighbours were arrested and incarcerated and shipped off to Buchenwald and Dachau. Late one night a group of Dutch lay people came to see Kramer. They said, “What should we do? Our neighbours are dying. We don’t know what is going to become of us as a nation. Please, please, if you can, tell us what to do. We have got to do something, and we have got to do it now. Hendrik Kraemer said to them: “I can’t tell you what to do, but I can tell you who you are. And if you know who you are, then you’ll know what to do.” He opened his Bible to 1 Peter and began to read: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God who called out of darkness into marvelous light.” Kramer closed his Bible. “Do you know who you are?” he asked. If so, “then you’ll know what to do.” The group thanked him and left. That night they formed the Dutch resistance.¹⁰

As you begin your ministry in Montreal – in a secular age, I can’t tell you what to do in the midst of all the challenges and changes. But I can invite you to remember who you are and whose you are. And I can pray that you will receive the grace to become what you have already been declared to be in Jesus Christ.

And now to the One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory in the church, and in Christ Jesus, now and forever. Amen.

⁹ I picked up this story a few years but have been unable to track down its original source. It is, however, according to the records, a true story.

¹⁰ Ronald Greer, *If You Know Who You Are You’ll Know What To Do: Living With Integrity*, Abingdon Press, 2009, 12.