

Today's Scripture describes a great injustice; it reminds us about reconciliation between First Nations and so-called 'settler' peoples. The word 'reconciliation' is defined as (1) when former enemies agree to an amicable truce; (2) when someone becomes resigned to something not desired; or (3) the process of making consistent or compatible. None of them quite meet the lofty ideals of the apologies given by both the Government of Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada for past wrongs committed against Indigenous peoples, nor even the 94 recommendations of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was chaired by Senator Murray Sinclair. On the first definition, I hope, despite their wrongful actions, that settler politicians never regarded the Indigenous peoples as enemies – less than equal, for sure, but hopefully not enemies. On the second, it is undoubtedly true that many in the settler community still feel resigned to accepting First Nations' demands as things they do not desire. Yet that is not a hopeful way forward. To 'make consistent or compatible' sounds uninspiring, but perhaps it is realistic and attainable. I will translate it roughly as 'to put right'.

Mark relates the gory story of the beheading of John the Baptist. On one level it is like an episode in a soap opera, with sex, violence, and people holding grudges. John had criticized Herodias, King Herod's wife, because she had been married to Herod's brother before she married Herod. It's not clear whether she had divorced Philip or Philip had died; either way, Herodias bore a grudge against John. Herod was on record as protecting John, but we sense that he had the hots for his step-daughter. So when Salome danced at Herod's extravagant birthday banquet, the old geezer was so smitten that he offered to give her anything she wanted. Salome asked her Mom what to ask for. Herodias got her revenge on John by telling Salome to ask for the head of John the Baptist to be brought in on a platter.

Herod made a stupid and rash promise to Salome. I imagine him boastful, lustful, and probably a bit drunk – the grand gesture in front of his cronies. When Salome asked him for something completely immoral, he refused to say no. It was important to keep face, so he didn't do the ethical thing by saying, "No. I don't care what I said before. You can't have that." And so John the Baptist was murdered.

There's a connection between this story and a petition in the Lord's Prayer. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" -- or in the modern words, "Save us from the time of trial, but deliver us from evil". Probably most people tend to see this petition rather superficially in terms of, "Save me from being tempted, and don't let anything bad happen to me." But King Herod's actions highlight a more profound meaning of this petition. "Save me from being tempted, save me from the potential evil within myself." Not just save me from external evil, save me from doing evil – or worse, save me from becoming the personification of evil. They say that the first time you cheat on your spouse you feel very guilty, but it gets easier and easier the more times you do it. The facile, "Don't let bad things happen to me," is clearly less momentous than, "Don't let me slide into being the face of evil."

From that perspective, it is not relevant to argue about whether 19<sup>th</sup> century Canadian politicians had good intentions or whether they were simply following what we now see as their outdated cultural traditions in their treatment of First Nations peoples. We now see that their actions – breaking treaties, taking land, separating children from their families – a very topical issue this week – were deeply wrong. Wittingly or not, they became the face of evil.

Last week, I said that thoughts and prayers in response to tragedy are not enough. They mean something only if they inspire us to take action – deeds not just words; works not just faith. To use a cynical phrase – words are cheap. By themselves, expressions of nice thoughts, nice prayers – even sincere expressions of apology for past wrongs – are also not enough. They mean nothing without actions to back them up.

About a year ago, I spoke in this church about the continuing pollution facing the Grassy Narrows First Nation in Northern Ontario. Their traditional fishing grounds were contaminated by mercury from paper mills in the 1960s. With your agreement, I asked to the diocese to make this matter a priority for our justice activities. Within months, the provincial government announced \$85 million to begin clean-up of the river, and I wrote again to the diocese expressing my gladness that there would be action at last. It would be a measure of reconciliation in that a wrong was to be put right. Yet, a year later, it transpired in the recent provincial election campaign that none of that money has actually been spent. No clean-up of the polluted river has taken place. Words are indeed cheap. We will now have a new provincial government, which may not feel bound by what seems like an empty promise of its predecessor.

Rather than lofty ideals, or cheap words, I see reconciliation – in the sense of putting right what was wrong – in terms of action. I cannot possibly speak to the aspirations of First Nations for the future. I am not Indigenous; moreover, each of the many First Nations all across Canada has its own unique set of objectives for what needs to be put right. But we can surely agree that it is intolerable that so many people who live in isolated, mainly First Nations, communities find themselves lacking amenities that those of in southern Ontario take for granted. I refer to clean drinkable water, decent education services, decent health care. We would not tolerate lack of these amenities in Milton, Burlington, or Guelph.

As I look back at King Herod, I hear the echoes of that well known hymn, *Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide/in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side*. Herod chose the evil side when he acquiesced to Salome's request. For us in Ontario, and for the provincial and federal governments that represent us, the path of least resistance is to do nothing – with Grassy Narrows just a single example. That is also the evil side, because it does not try to put right previous wrongs.

Many people have commented on the difference between the lofty ideals of the United States – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – with our more prosaic Canadian aspirations – peace, order, and good government. Good government suggests that it should not be beyond the capacity of a wealthy nation like Canada to provide clean drinking water, and access to decent health care and education for everyone, especially now that technology offers opportunities in the spheres of education and health care delivery that did not exist a generation ago.

Today's offertory hymn, *Amazing Grace*, is very popular in many First Nations parishes. Like *Once to every man and nation*, it holds a parable in the well known story of its author John Newton. Newton was a slave-ship captain, who one day had an epiphany. He came to realize that his work was deeply and grievously wrong. "I was blind, but now I see – by God's grace." Many of us have been blind to injustices carried out in our name, by our governments, but now we see – by God's grace.

Reconciliation means putting wrongs to rights; actions include such prosaic matters as providing decent amenities to our First Nations brothers and sisters. Good Lord: lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from doing or becoming evil. Amen.