

The Priest As Bridge.

The Rev. Rob Crosby-Shearer + All Saints/Ordination of Dyan Davison + Nov 1, 2019 + St. Mary Oak Bay + Revelation 7 / Luke 6: 20-31

I speak to you in the name of God – Source of All Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit.
Amen. (pause)

In a seminary class on Indigenous and Christian spiritualities, the Cree professor welcomed us into the first class with the question: “This course should be easy right? Christians and Indigenous folk – we both believe in the spirit world, right?”

He then, with a big belly laugh asked the class: “Hey, any of you done an exorcism yet? They really ain’t that hard.”

I think it’s safe to say that most of the folks in that room, predominantly liberal protestants of European descent, raised in enlightenment cultures - were just a wee bit nervous. Even as religious leaders, most of us were used to downplaying the weird notion of the spiritual world. But you just gotta take the challenge seriously when it comes from a 6-foot-tall Cree man. And, that day, it did take a First Nation teacher to remind us that it’s OK for us Christians to believe in the world of spirits.

I’d suggest that this pesky Feast of All Saints challenges us in a similar way as my Cree professor did. Readings, like the one we just heard from the book of Revelation, posit what the old hymn calls a “mystic sweet communion” – a “fellowship divine” - somewhere beyond the great veil. And in that surreal, cosmic vision, John the Revelator suggests that we are somehow in the here-and-now connected to elders and ancestors in faith, who are actively worshipping the Lamb of God – that is, the crucified and risen One - beyond the veil.

It’s no accident, I think, that the Great Tradition sees this time of the year as when the veil between those realities is thinnest – where the worlds of matter and spirit – though always intertwined and interwoven - are experienced as closer to each other.

It reminds us that the church is not merely a social club, or even a set of rituals to make sense of our lives in the changes and chances of this world. It reminds us that the priesthood is not primarily an administrative or social function.

With that seasonal backdrop, and as we explored the meaning of priesthood this week on retreat with Dyan, we asked ourselves, what is a priest? One text we read, based on the work of past Archbishops of Canterbury, posited a beautiful model that a priest can be regarded as a watchperson, a witness – and a weaver.

And as we explored our own callings to be watchers, witnesses and weavers, the related image of the priest as a bridge started to enter into our conversations.

For to serve as bridges in a polarized us-versus-them world; as bridges between the church and world, between this side of the veil and the other – and even for Dyan, between the law courts and the ancient mysteries of the church – what a profound honour that is!

Perhaps it's not fashionable to say it, but I think there's still some sense that the priest is to act 'in persona Christi', this is, in the person of Christ – and as she does, she is, again, standing as the bridge, opening us all to the reality of those saints – all our relations - who worship around the throne, bridging *that* reality to the very moment we find ourselves in on this plane. Somehow embodying that liminal space where wheat becomes flesh and wine becomes blood.

And Dyan very much embodies this notion of priest-as-bridge. She is a lawyer, of course – where fact and detail and logical argument are the foundations of that vocation - and, as we got to know her, we found that she as much, or more - a mystic in the truest sense of the word.

Bishop Logan introduced Dyan's diaconal retreat over a year ago as being about a different kind of priesthood. I was in that cohort too. I now serve as an Anglican priest/Church planter and a United Church bureaucrat and Dyan as a lawyer and soon-to be priest. We can think of others – such as Fr. Ian - a priest and hotel manager - who sense ourselves as called to be a bi-vocational priests in this changing age.

The Episcopal Priest, Fr. Daniel Hall, a bi-vocational priest and surgeon writes: "I am called to both vocations, and my ministry is aimed at the interface of these two vocations rather than one "trade" serving the ends of the other "vocation." Neither identity would be complete without the influence of the other. I am an ambassador between the two worlds of church and hospital that deal with many of the same people in the same life crises, but speak totally different languages. Because I am in this sense "bilingual," I can facilitate the conversation between these two worlds so that each might better address the needs of the people in their care... As a preacher and a priest, I am called to be a sacramental witness of Christ in a foreign land."

You see, Fr. Daniel also serves as a bridge. Which all sounds lovely and romantic, doesn't it? But it can also be tough. Someone once said to me the tough thing about being a bridge is that people always walk on your back. And that can hurt like hell.

I love, then, that the Church – from the BCP lectionary right until today has contrasted the mystical vision of revelation - of the saints worshipping around the throne - with the gritty earthy reality of the Beatitudes on this, the Feast of All Saints.

With this contrast of the cosmic hope and heavenly worship – with the broken-hearted now, I can't help but be reminded, of Fr. Brennan Manning's quote: "A saint is not someone who is good, but who recognizes the goodness of God."

Even with all the scandals, there's still a tendency to put priests on a pedestal. But the best advice I was ever given, was to see my ordination as a demotion. A demotion into the place of joyfully living into those beatitudes. Blessed Dorothy Day was right to cheekily say "Don't call me a saint – I don't want to be dismissed that easily."

It is nothing short of a call to live fully into this demotion. And so it is no accident, then, that Dyan's own call came to her in a restlessness which broke her open to the goodness of God in a profound way that led her to this day.

I'd suggest to you today that the broken-heartedness, the inner poverty, the hunger and the weeping that Jesus calls blessed - are not something to ascribe to or strive for like a checklist. No, that is not sainthood. But I do think that those who face that broken reality are somehow, paradoxically opened to the goodness of God in their lives.

And so it is that we who weep for the brokenness of our lives, and the world and the church are not simply called to be good upstanding community leaders - but to live fully into the realization of God's goodness, mercy and grace and hold out our arms as a vulnerable bridge pointing to the interconnectedness of us all and the divine presence in our midst.

What an incredible honour that as people of faith, our lives can somehow begin to shape a bridge between this everpresent mystic communion, this awesome and indescribable glory of God and the human fleshy reality of the poor, the brokenhearted, the hungry and thirsty, those calling for justice and reconciliation.

I think there can be no deeper joy for one so called. No deeper joy than to live in the grittiness and tearfulness of existence - and, at the same time to live as witnesses to a celestial resurrection choir of every tongue and tribe and nation.

To be a bridge, a weaver, a watchperson...

To be witnesses, ultimately, of the One, who in the midst of the brokenness leads us all to springs of living water and will wipe away every tear. We are indeed watchers and witnesses of something beyond - surrounded by that Spirit world, my professor reminded us of. And we are weavers of a great hope where we will all sing - not to Caesar and the empires of this earth - but to a broken lamb whose blood makes us whole.

Dyan, thank you for the beautiful offering you are making today and for the gifts you will bring to this church. Thank you for calling us all back into the joy of the Divine Heart at the center of all things.

May you know the presence of the Lamb - and may you be aware that all the saints surround you in grace and love as you as you are led into this ancient, sacred and wondrous calling.

In the name of the Three-in-One, and One-in-Three. Amen.