

Sermon: January 29, 2023, for Christ Church Cathedral

by Bishop Anna

To be a bishop is to be entrusted with episcopal leadership. *Episcopa* is a funny word; it comes from the Latin, *Episcopas*, which means “an overseer.” And so, in my role as bishop, I oversee this vast and diverse diocese we call the Islands and Inlets. The diocese covers the traditional territories of over 50 Indigenous nations who can be divided into three major language groups: the Coast Salish, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Kwakwaka’wakw speaking peoples. Our diocese has a long history and a lot of infrastructure. Forty-six churches, twenty-six cemeteries, seven housing societies, a school, and the largest refugee sponsorships program on Vancouver Island. And at the centre of it all, stands this beautiful historic cathedral.

There is a lot that makes our diocese beautiful and unique but among them is the fact that we are the most secular diocese in North America.

Needless to say, Canada is more secular than the US, and when we look at Canada’s 2021 census data we see that while one-third of Canadians identify as having no religion, here in BC it is much higher with 52% province-wide saying they have no religion. Vancouver reports 47% as having no religion. The most secular urban centre in North America is reported to be Nanaimo at 62%. Here in Victoria, it’s 60%, making this the most secular cathedral city on the continent.

Things look much different on the East Coast with only 20% of respondents in St. John’s, Newfoundland, saying they are not part of any religious denomination.

And so, what does it mean to be the Diocese of Islands and Inlets in 2023 amidst these huge society shifts and changes, amidst the environmental crisis, the housing crisis, the toxic drug supply, and the pandemic of social isolation we are living through?

If I am sure of anything, I am sure of this: the future is not going to look like the past.

Let that sit with you for a moment. And be honest with yourself. In your body, what are you feeling? Anxiety, fear, curiosity, relief, excitement?

It will depend, a bit, on what the past has been like for you. If you were a slave in Egypt, it’s good news that the future is not going to look like the past. But if you are enjoying a privileged position in David’s kingdom, maybe not so much. Similarly, if you’re poor, it’s good news that the future is not going to look like the past. But if you’re rich, maybe you’ll be worried about being turned away empty.

That the future is not going to look like the past shouldn’t surprise us. God has never come to anyone and said, “Okay, stay as you are, and do everything the same as you have always done. I’ll make this easy for you.”

No, instead God is always and everywhere making all things new. God is always and everywhere leading people, inviting people, calling people, into an unknown future in faith.

Today's first reading from the Prophet Micah is God calling people into an unknown future in faith. Micah was writing in the 8th Century before Christ arrived—and things were a mess. Samaria fell, Assyria was on the rise. The future was very uncertain. Before long, Jerusalem will be sieged, the temple will be sacked, and the people will be carried off into exile in Babylon.

The people Micah is prophesizing to are living through changing times, liminal times. And some of them, instead of dealing with the changing reality out there, are hunkering down in the temple and offering burnt offerings and empty worship. "No thanks," says God. "What I would really prefer is that you do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

Most of us have heard this before—we have, dare I say, even tried to live it. And perhaps many of you, like me, might feel it sting a bit when you hear it said that the church often gets this mixed up a bit and instead of doing justice and loving kindness, we love justice, and we do kindness.

Doing justice sounds a bit like foolishness doesn't it? But maybe, maybe, it's just what the world needs?

A few years ago, Brian McLaren wrote a book I would commend to you called "The Great Spiritual Migration." Following on the thesis of Phillis Tickle and others, we are living through what they term the Great Emergence—the biggest societal, religious, political, and technological shift since the Reformation. McLaren posits that despite the rumours, spurred by statistics such as the census data I gave you about how many people identify as no religion, the fact is that Christianity is not so much dying as going through a once-in-an-era spiritual shift.

He says that we are shifting spiritually from defining ourselves by beliefs to defining ourselves by a way of life defined by love.

He says that we are shifting theologically by moving away from the idea of a violent supreme-being to a renewing spirit at work in the world.

Finally, we are shifting missionally in that people are identifying less and less with organized religion and more and more with causes such as the environment, peace, and poverty.

Since the Reformation, Christianity, McLaren says, has organized itself to perpetuate a belief system and we're at a stage in history where people just can't believe whatever it is they think they have to believe to be a Christian, anymore. Hence ticking "no religion" on the census data or people saying they are *spiritual but not religious*. But these same people also, by and large, are all on board with the call to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly.

McLaren posits that the church needs to shift gears and instead of thinking that our primary job is to perpetuate a belief system, that we should instead get organized to bring more love, more joy, and more justice to the world. And this: this sounds to me a whole lot like what we heard this morning both from Micah and from Jesus.

Diana Butler Bass also weighs in on this in her book "Christianity after Religion," in which she explains that "the three Bs" of belief, behaviour, and belonging have always been and will always be key to the Christian journey. But post-Enlightenment and post-Reformation, we put belief first, as the gatekeeper. You had to believe, and then you had to behave, in order to belong. But now, it's time to turn it on its head and tell people that, by Grace, they belong, and then invite them on a journey of behaving justly, kindly, humbly, which is undergirded by our beliefs in God, Christ and the Spirit.

And so, good people of the Cathedral, here in the early days of 2023, in the decade I am calling the Turbulent 2020s, in the most secular diocese in North America, what does the future hold?

Well, what we do know is that the future is not going to look like the past. And that's alright. And that being smack in the middle of a population that, by and large, ticks the "no religion" box, that's not a problem to be solved so much as an opportunity to be embraced.

And yes, things are not the same as they used to be when we enjoyed a privileged place in the colony. When racist and white supremacist immigration policies did wonders for church growth. When being "religious" afforded people a level of societal approval that translated into bums in pews and dollars in collection plates in a way that we sometimes look back at with fondness.

But really, truly, the fact that the future is not going to look like the past is good news. For God is always trying to set the captives free, to lift up the lowly and bring the mighty down from their thrones. God has always been trying to get us to shape ourselves, mind, body and soul, into instruments of God's love and justice.

And so let us look to one another and the future in hope. Yes, there are challenges ahead of us, and the future is not going look like the past, but by faith, by grace, in love, the church endures.