



Anglican Communion Safe Church Consultation 'Partnering for Prevention'

Notes of a sermon delivered by the Rt Revd Mark MacDonald, National Indigenous Anglican Bishop, Anglican Church of Canada

St John Kronstadt: “To repent is to know that there is a lie in our heart.”

John the Baptist, whose birth we celebrate today, is a perfect patron for this conference. The proclamation of the Gospel, in its fullness, has two personalities – one is John, the other is the Virgin Mary. Both of them stand at the door of a significant beginning of the Gospel – Mary at the door of the life of Jesus; John at the door of the ministry, sacrifice, and Resurrection of Jesus. Mary is the icon of the hidden miraculous presence of God in Creation and history – God is near to you! John is a window on another aspect: the need we have to turn from sin and evil and enter the rule of God.

In recent times, Western Christianity has largely ignored John. This is, perhaps, due to the way his very communal message sounds in cultures that have an almost religious devotion to the idea of individual autonomy. Because of this emphasis, it is difficult for people in the West to understand instances of systemic evil – the suffering inflicted on Indigenous Peoples in Canada through the Residential Schools, for example. Because of the distortions that an extraordinary belief in individual autonomy produces, people can only view such horrific evils as the cumulative product of individual action and thought. It is hard to imagine that individuals were often overcome by the strength of a system of thought and life that had become very evil; yes, with the participation of evil acts of individuals, but there is so much more to horrific evil. It is intriguing that we seem to understand the effect of systemic evil when it comes to understanding problems in families, like chemical dependency and family violence. It is amazing and confounding that we have not been able to apply this wisdom to our understanding of communal or systemic evil.

The message of John speaks to systemic evil. Note that the people who interact with John are representatives of very important aspects of the oppressive systems that were a part of contemporary life. The Gospel ministry of John unveils what St. John of Kronstadt called the “lie” in the heart of his society. This lie has to do with the deception of groups and institutions, often even a whole nation and culture. Today, we could identify this as a critical aspect of the capacity of societies can look away from the global scale of the poverty and suffering of women, or the widespread toleration of the abuse of children and elders.

A psychiatrist was once asked for a clinical diagnosis and description of schizophrenia. He said, "The absence of psychotropic drugs." In other words, his fairly glib answer is that the diagnosis of the problem is so complex that we must describe it as the absence of the only way that we know how to treat people – and, at that, not so well.

I am often afraid that we are in a similar position with Safe Church issues. What is going on, a tragic and horrible breakdown in social and cultural norms, is described, quite often, as the absence of the safeguards that we have developed to meet this problem. We have not, perhaps cannot, step back and look at what is going on. We don't know what "lie" is in our hearts, what the societal, cultural, and institutional breakdown is at hand.

I am fundamentally and absolutely committed to the safeguards that we have set in place. It is, at this time, a necessary element of what it means to be a just and holy church. At the same time, however, we must step back and let the John the Baptist aspect of the Gospel reveal the lie that still is in our hearts.