

Opening Service Sermon: Bishop Miguel Tamayo of Cuba and Uruguay

Sermon for the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada

Halifax, Nova Scotia

3rd June, 2010

Blessed God, put your Word in my lips, to proclaim it. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

First of all, I'd like to share, my profound gratitude, with my brother bishop, Fred Hiltz, Archbishop of your Church, who has kindly invited me for this opportunity, this place of honour, which I do not deserve.

I know he has done so, due to the close relationship of partnership and brotherly love, which unites us through our respective Churches. That is why, I bring with me, warm and fraternal greetings from the two dioceses of which I am bishop: the Episcopal Church of Cuba, in the Caribbean and the Anglican Church of Uruguay, in South America.

The links which join both Churches with the Canadian Anglican Church are historical and indestructible. I would like to tell you a little about that, before entering more fully, into the meditation on God's Word which we have just heard, from the Old as well as from the New Testament; because I am sure that to establish a cordial relationship with you, it is essential, to thereafter be able to share what I am certain our Lord has put in my heart for this special occasion, as we share together.

The Episcopal Church of Cuba had few links with the Anglican Church of Canada, before 1959. A product of the missionary work on behalf of the Episcopal Church of the United States of America, was an integral part of it, up until the Revolution, whose leaders still govern the country to this date.

In a few years, the existing political situation overturned the international relationships and Cuba found herself isolated, given that the majority of the countries on the continent broke their diplomatic relationships with her. Canada never joined the other countries and therefore, never severed her relationship with Cuba.

Naturally, this affected the Church. Years later, in 1968, the Episcopal Church of Cuba was invited by the Church in the United States, to become an extra-provincial diocese within the Anglican Communion, under the authority of the Metropolitan Council, which would be formed by the Anglican Churches of Canada, United States and the British West Indies. The Anglican Church of Canada would preside that Council and that is the way it has been, to date. As a result, in a way, Archbishop Fred is also our Archbishop.

Thanks to the role played by this Council, and may I add, without a doubt, your presidency, the Cuban Church has not remained isolated. This is something which the Cuban Anglicans will never forget and for which we will be forever thankful to God.

From among the Cuban Anglicans, I have a very special gratitude because I have been very blessed by our pastoral caring, within the Church which saw me as I was born, gave me my faith and prepared me for the ministry and where for more than 40 years, I have served within.

Because when I was chosen to be an ‘overseas partner’ for the World Mission Committee, during the ‘80’s, I had the opportunity of making very close relationships with your leaders, who in 1993, at the Diocese of Uruguay’s Bishop’s request to the Canadian Church, for a Spanish-speaking, missionary priest, who would support the recently-founded diocese, I was sent to that country as a Cuban missionary, supported by the Canadian Church, under the auspices of what was perhaps, one of the first ‘South-south’ projects of our Churches.

Without a doubt therefore, I conclude that we have lived and are living, a life of communion in mission, which is based on the Gospel of today: Jesus Christ as the true vine and we, as the branches of that lovely vine.

Is this passage of Scripture familiar? The quote “I am the vine and you are the branches” does it stand out and feel like a message that really fits in this great time for your Church?

It seems especially appropriate when you think of it as preparation for the approaching time of another three years of Church life in Canada—especially in the sense of the vine sending out branches, as we read in John’s Gospel.

But we can’t get ahead of ourselves. At this time of Church liturgical celebrations, we are still trying to understand what Easter means to us at this time and in this place.

In our parishes’ Sunday’s celebrations we have heard stories of an encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. We hear the story about Jesus as a “good shepherd,” and the beautiful prayer of Psalm 23 reminding us that we are on a pilgrimage but we are not alone. Jesus is with us.

And you also heard Jesus saying good-bye to the disciples. Jesus really wants to be sure they/we know what to do next. So, hearing a sermon with an interpretation of such a familiar text might tempt us to say, “we really get it.” But, do we? Let’s “go down the garden path” together and go into the vineyard and take another look.

You don’t have to be a gardener to understand the language in this passage. We know that grapes, raisins, and wine come from grape vines. That’s the easy part. But what does the vine grower do to produce a plentiful and healthy harvest?

Just for a moment, picture a vineyard in the late fall or early winter. It is time for pruning: a vine grower walks into his vineyard with a very sharp knife. Beginning at one end, and working his way down the rows, each plant is pruned; no plant is ignored. There are obvious dead branches sucking away the life-giving force of the vine. They must be pruned to save the vine.

Other branches are pruned back too so that they will bear more fruit in the next growing season. Then there are the branches that are just not strong enough to hold the weight of the fruit. It is better to prune those back now rather than to let the inevitable break happen.

Some of the vine branches just don't seem able to hold up to the early appearance of heat or the dryness of the season. Or maybe it was the moisture of the increased rain in the spring that stressed the vines.

These vines need some extra help. The vine grower may cut into the vine and graft another more viable variety onto it to make it stronger and hope for the new fruit that will come from the joining.

It does not seem like an easy job to be a vine grower. You have to know what a healthy vine looks like and when to prune. You can't prune in the spring or summer because pruning causes bleeding and weakens the vine. If you make a mistake and prune too late you know there is no cure for the sap bleeding that occurs, but the problem will decrease when the leaves finally emerge.

In our reading today, John describes God as the vine grower who has planted a vine, Jesus. The Father removes every branch that bears no fruit and prunes the other branches so they will bear more fruit.

The branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine and John tells us that neither can we bear fruit unless we abide in Jesus just as Jesus abides in us. And here is where the familiar phrase comes into the text.

Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Jesus tells us that by abiding in him we will bear much fruit and that apart from Jesus we can do nothing. Those of us who do not abide in Jesus will wither and be thrown away, just as withered branches are thrown into the fire and burned.

This part of the Gospel is really thought provoking. You may well have never thought about God as the vine grower—but certainly God is the creator. And God did plant Jesus into our lives. Through the Gospels, we are invited into a more intimate relationship with Jesus.

But what does it mean to have this intimate relationship with Jesus?

Now comes to my mind the words of Saint Paul writing to the Philippians 2: 5-7

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men."

The apostle points out that to have an intimate relationship with Jesus is to be able to have his mind and heart, and for that reason is that he asks them to have it.

But, how could this be possible? Is it something we can get doing our best effort? I don't think so. This is a gift from God, from God the Holy Spirit. But a gift only can be received if we want it to. Our role is then to want it and ask for it!

God is the vine grower and Jesus is the vine. Our roles are to be the branches. This so clearly describes our roles in God's mission. God planted Jesus in our lives and that vine produces branches. If we are the branches then we are also going to have to deal with the cutting part.

Remember the vine grower is pruning each branch so that it might bear more fruit. That sounds like it is going to hurt. And every branch is cut even it is bearing fruit now, because by cutting it will bear more fruit. If we are the branches, then what is being cut or pruned?

You might be thinking of some things that are obviously in need of being cut away and maybe some things we wish someone would cut away. But what about those things that are weighing us down and, as branches, we are at risk for breakage from the weight?

It might actually feel good to have some of that removed. Think of what it might feel like to lose some of that stuff. Might we be better able to be a good strong branch bearing fruit if we were not so loaded down and on the verge of breakage?

It seems as if there might be many things that fit easily into this category of “needing to be pruned,” and some not so obvious things, as well. One way or another, though, we know that pruning is going to happen and it will probably hurt to some degree. The end result promises that we will be more fruitful.

Our job here seems to be identifying what needs pruning in our lives and letting it go. Our job is also to be open to being pruned of things that we would not have thought needed to go. And our job is being open and welcoming to grating because it will make us stronger. The hope in this whole business of pruning is the promise of fruitfulness and the assurance that just as Jesus abides in us we abide in Jesus.

We could all probably think of many things that would fit into these categories. A topic on many of our minds these days is about how to be Christians, individually and corporately, and what that means.

As an example, we know that the sins of racism and classism and sexism—and all the other “isms”—keep us from being fruitful, because these are all things that set us apart from others.

In our changing societies, we are expected to accept the grafting of the “newcomer” with the knowledge that the joining will make us better.

As we consider these things, we also need to keep in mind that the Gospel tells us that separated from Jesus we can’t do anything. He is the vine. We are the branches.

In our personal and corporate lives as Christians and as a Christian community, there is ample evidence of the need for pruning. What will we choose to prune?

I hope and pray that this holy assembly will work on that with the help of the Holy Spirit. Feeling the Winds of God which bring fresh air to your Church life and charting a new course.

This is the communion we share. The communion which is having the mind and heart of Jesus. The communion of bonds of love and affection, serving the world he died for, being the branches of Jesus’ vine.

Amen.