



HOMILY OF THE MOST REV. DONALD BOLEN, ARCHBISHOP OF REGINA

**Fourth Sunday of Advent
Sunday, 19 December 2021**

Today's Readings:

1st Reading: Micah 5:1-4A;

2nd Reading: Hebrews 10_5-10

Gospel: Luke 1 1:39-45

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is the 4th Sunday of Advent, the darkest Sunday of the year in terms of hours of daylight, but a day full of expectation. We hold in our imaginations Mary and Joseph, on the way to Bethlehem, Mary days away from giving birth, carrying within her the little one who created all things and who indeed carries us. Today's Gospel moves us back a few months earlier, as we hear of Mary travelling to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, who is also with child. St Luke says Mary travelled with haste. Something extraordinary is happening, and Elizabeth is in some way sharing the mystery of this moment.

Through this Advent season, we have also turned our attention to another journey, that of the Indigenous delegation to Rome to meet with Pope Francis. The First Nations, Métis and Inuit survivors, elders, knowledge keepers, leaders, and youth were scheduled to be in Rome right now, with meetings with Pope Francis already under way. The encounter had been in the planning for three years, but the pandemic has caused one delay after another – and we find ourselves yet again in the waiting mode. But this waiting, just as in the season of Advent, needn't and shouldn't be a passive waiting; it can be a time of expectation, preparation, and transformation. We trust that God can turn all things to good, and the delay itself can serve as a reminder that the path to reconciliation and right relationships is long, with forks on the road, bumps and detours. The walking together is more important than any particular destination along the way, and living this particular moment as faithfully and generously as possible is the task the Lord has given us.

The preparation for the trip to Rome has included the experience of listening circles held in different parts of the country, where bishops have been able to hear firsthand of varied and at times brutally painful Indigenous experiences of church, and where we have seen anew the honesty and resilience, strength and wisdom of Indigenous people and Indigenous ways. When the delegates and Pope Francis will eventually have the opportunity to meet, each delegate will have stories to tell, stories carrying a lifetime of experiences, sufferings and joys. We pray that their encounter will point us to renewing ways for all of us to walk together on this land.

There have been many meaningful encounters between Indigenous Peoples and Popes before, and they provide some context for the current visit. In 1987, St. Pope John Paul II visited Fort Simpson, in the Northwest Territories, 3 years after an earlier attempt to visit there which was postponed because his plane couldn't land as a result of poor weather conditions. There he acknowledged that for untold generations, Indigenous Peoples "have lived in a relationship of trust with the Creator." He encouraged them in addressing the challenge of promoting, I quote, "the religious, cultural and social values that will uphold your human dignity and ensure your future well-being. Your sense of sharing, your understanding of human community rooted in the family, the highly valued relationships between your elders and your young people, your spiritual view of creation which calls for responsible care and protection of the environment - all of these traditional aspects of your way of life need to be preserved and cherished."

The Indigenous delegation to Rome in 2009 led by then AFN National Chief Phil Fontaine to meet with Pope Benedict, and Pope Francis's address to the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas in Bolivia in 2015, were also important moments of encounter. These encounters acknowledged the suffering and injustice experienced by Indigenous Peoples. Today, further steps are needed to come to terms with the past and to move forward in a good way.

All of this we bring into today's celebration of the 4th Sunday of Advent. It is timely to ponder the long journey of truth and reconciliation as we as Church prepare to celebrate the extraordinary decision and act of God to come into the world, to take flesh, to embrace the human condition. The Incarnation, God's way of healing and redeeming a wounded humanity by walking with us, accompanying us with mercy in our pain and in our joy, this has everything to do with how the Church is being called to walk with Indigenous Peoples today in this land. God walks with us. The Risen Lord is neither afraid nor reluctant to come

walk with us in the messiness and brokenness of our lives, the pain and complexity of this moment in time. Indeed because of the Incarnation we believe that Jesus is at home in all of that, and asks us to be at home in it as well. And God asks us to walk with each other in the same spirit, immersing ourselves in the challenges, struggles and complexities of our histories and our lives.

Giving birth to something new is not easy. It is messy and traumatic. But with every birth, God is doing something new. So let us ask God to allow something new to be born out of our efforts to deal honestly with the past, to adopt a deep posture of listening, to learn from the wisdom of Indigenous ways, and to learn how to walk in a deep and committed solidarity with Indigenous Peoples as the Creator guides them, guides us all, to a future full of hope.

"Rich blessings on these last days of Advent!"