Pentecost, May 31, 2020

I.

How can we understand each other when we do not speak the same language?

Looking at it from the eyes of some, the path to this moment starts with a theft. On the outskirts of Jerusalem, in Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives: LOST OR STOLEN one donkey and a colt.

If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them."

We will never know what became of the animals. Events overtake them, just as Jesus knew they would. When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

The path to this moment starts with a different view of ownership and trust, "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them…."

Property is a funny thing. It can leave us empty.

The path to this moment starts with a misunderstanding. It is late autumn 1818, a group of Beothuk leave their mamatuks and go in search of food along the river the Europeans have named Exploits. They chance upon a boat, some gear left idle – gifts from God. They decide to put this find to use – they had need of it.

The Peyton family have a different view of property and a clear sense of ownership – LOST OR STOLEN one boat and some gear. John Peyton, Sr sends his son and some armed men – get me back what is mine.

On March 5, 1819 John Peyton, Jr. captures Demasduit. She has recently given birth to a son – she exposes her breasts to the men to show them she is nursing, like so many European pictures of the Madonna and Child. The men take Demasduit and the infant captive and hold them hostage. Nonosabasut comes to beg for his wife and child. He approaches the armed men holding the tip of a pine branch, a symbol of peace. They shoot him dead.

The baby dies.

Father and son are placed in a common Mausoleum, according to the rights of the Beothuk people.

Demasduit is taken away.

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At first Demasduit is made to live with the local cleric in Twillingate, the Revd John Leigh. She is renamed Mary, after the Virgin, and March after the month she was found/captured/kidnapped (raped?) – and she will be "civilised" by these men who have killed her family and her people. At some point she is taken to live in St John's, the colonial capital. The wife of the Governor, Lady Hamilton, paints her portrait (the portrait survives in Ottawa). Demasduit does not survive; sick with TB (and surely broken hearted) she dies aboard the vessel *Grasshopper* on January 8, 1820. She is placed beside her husband and son.

When John Cabot first went to Terra Nova in the late-15thC he kidnapped Beothuk people as proof of his journey. They were treated as animal specimens, to be labelled and displayed. But who were the real animals? After a few hundred years of exploitation, resource extraction, cultural disruption, violence, murder and European diseases, by 1820 there are only 31 Beothuk remaining.

Property is a funny thing. It can leave us empty.

The niece of Demasduit is called Shawnawdithit – as a child she was shot by a European trapper - her extended family have died from starvation, illness, exposure and British attack. In 1823 Shawnawdithit's father dies after falling through the ice. Shawnawdithit, her mother, Doodebewshet, and a sister (who's name is lost to history) are taken captive. Doodebewshet and her "nameless" daughter soon die of TB. Her named daughter, in her early 20s, will spend 6 years in domestic servitude.

Shawnawdithit is the last of the Beothuk. She is taken from Exploits island to St John's, to be "civilised" - just like her aunt. The explorer William Epps Cormack takes an interest in her – in 1822 he was the first European to cross the interior of Newfoundland; in 1827 he establishes a centre for the study of the Beothuk people. Perhaps Cormack does really wish to help Shawnawdithit but motivations are complicated mixtures of things. Shawnawdithit will do 10 drawings for Cormack, along with teaching him some of the language and stories of her people.

In 1828 William Cormack goes to the grave of Nonosabasut and Demasduit and removes their skulls and some possessions. He takes them across the Pond (Atlantic Ocean) to Liverpool where he discusses them with his friend (and lover?) John McGregor and finally to Edinburgh where the skulls and objects make their way into the collection of the Royal Museum.

Property is a funny thing. It can leave us empty.

By now Shawnadithit is working as the domestic servant for the Attorney General of Newfoundland, James Simms. She is known as Nancy April. Dr William Carson has taken an interest in the young woman, but he cannot save her life. On June 6, 1829 Shawnadithit dies of TB – the last of the Beothuk – all the people have died in what is now a complete cultural genocide. Nancy makes the papers not just in Newfoundland (June 12) but also in London (September 14). What respect is paid?

The skull of Shawnadithit is removed and taken to London to form part of the collection of the Royal College of Physicians; a century later in 1938 it will be gifted to the Royal College of Surgeons – it will not survive the Blitz, destroyed by Nazi bombing

Property is a funny thing. It can leave us empty.

The rest of Shawnadithit is placed in the churchyard of St Mary the Virgin. The grave is built over for railway construction in 1903. The church is pulled down in 1963. There is a memorial cairn there today – for the woman the British started calling the Princess of Terra Nova.

You know what? Property is a funny thing. It can leave us empty.

II.

Have you ever entered a room and felt an uneasy sense of the past, a certain atmosphere? Have you ever felt a spiritual pull or longing which made you emotional, uneasy, and disquieted? Have you ever had to go backwards in order to go forwards?

It strikes me these occurrences must have been common among the followers of Jesus, the first disciples, as they journeyed with him across borders and against expectations, meeting people of all descriptions and in all circumstances. They had left their known lives. Things didn't get easier once they entered Jerusalem.

After these 10 weeks of lockdown and with several more weeks to go before we will be allowed to meet in any form in the church building, I wonder if there is a feeling of emptiness for some of you? And is there anything welcome or helpful about this emptiness? Do we feel we are waiting for something or someone – or maybe someone or something is waiting for us? Would this not have been the feeling of the faithful once the Risen Lord had ascended? After everything, "What now?"

It is said people are uncomfortable in an empty room. We rush to fill it with stuff.

Of course time can fill a room – and time can be hopeful or dreadful. These weeks have confused our sense of time – so we are left with questions of connection and disconnection, being and nothingness if you will. We are unsettled, for good and for bad.

I long to have that sense of peace which comes from being at the altar – the place where heaven and earth meet, the place where I am meant to be as a priest. When I am there I feel free from the wish to be anywhere else.

To me, this is the feeling of Pentecost – this is the Peace of God which passes all understanding – the heart of the Church.

Of course it was through the fire of the burning bush (it burned but it was not consumed) the journey out of slavery began – the long walk to the Promised Land. The Jewish Festival of Weeks, Shavuot, which is being celebrated as I write these words, reminds us of the Harvest of the Law – Pentecost is the Christian equivalent – a reminder of our Calling in the Church to be a union of all people to proclaim a Gospel of Peace. The Baptism of Fire purifies us - what is not true falls away until we are fully ourselves. We are baptised with fire – made into the Holy Church – a promised land which is not a place but a powerful idea of interconnected lives participating in the fullness of salvation – this is the tie that binds us together not a late-Victorian building, lovely though she may be.

Receiving gifts is not always easy. And what about eternal gifts? What words can we possibly find to acknowledge the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter? No words – but a life committed to discernment – actions rooted in love and compassion. Surely part of this authentic life is an honesty about the past (forgive our foolish ways)?

Why is it so many claim the Gift of the Fire, but in so few can be found actual warmth?

And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

III.

On March 11, the day the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 Pandemic, the remains of Nonosabasut and Demasduit (aka Mary March), after years of wrangling and debate, were repatriated to Newfoundland from Scotland.

They remain in a box in a museum in St John's.

May the divided tongues of understanding dance on your authentic head.

*Caminante, son tus huellas*

*el camino, y nada más;*

*caminante, no hay camino,*

*se hace camino al andar.*

*Al andar se hace camino,*

*y al volver la vista atrás*

*se ve la senda que nunca*

*se ha de volver a pisar.*

*Caminante, no hay camino,*

*sino estelas en la mar.*

--- Antonio Machado