

The Gift Outright: A Conversation with Bishop Mark MacDonald of Alaska on our common future

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...
“But we were England's, still colonials,
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves
We were withholding from our land of living,
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)”

...

Robert Frost, *The Gift Outright*

I least expect this conversation. Bishop Mark MacDonald was two years my senior at Wycliffe College, Toronto. I remember his broad smile and gentle manners. He was then the President of the Student Council, the formidable “Senior Stick”. I kept him at a distance. I was just a fresher. He went on to serve in the American church, and is now the Bishop of Alaska. I eventually returned to East Asia after a blessed detour in the United Kingdom. Both of us – as many of our fellow students – owe much to our godly theology professor Oliver O’Donovan, who graced us with his prayers, homilies and lectures. That was nearly thirty years ago.

Recently Bishop MacDonald kindly sent me his essay “The Gospel comes to North America”. I am grateful for this opportunity of conversation, and for his kind permission to include his paper with this response.

A church that would hold that this land is sacred

MacDonald’s article is an intensely personal one. What has the Christian faith got to do with the natives in North America, his own people? He begins with the challenge from Bishop Gordon Beardy when he first became the Bishop of Alaska: ‘Would a church emerge in the Arctic that believes “this is sacred land”? ‘

MacDonald discovers “God’s grace and sovereignty in the history and on going life of the People of the land, the aboriginal nations” precedes and triumphs over all institutional efforts. He criticizes the Doctrine of Discovery, the outlook adopted by “churches of the West in North America” that “civilization is not present if the institutions of Western Culture are not available”. And yet, despite these blunders and follies, we see:

“God’s Word has always had a vital and prophetic presence among the Peoples of the Land. In their diverse cultures and histories, we see constant suggestions of that presence, before, during, and after the arrival of the missionaries.”

He sees that while the West is in retreat, there is a growing vitality among churches in the Fourth World (the Peoples of the Land) which is also obvious in the Global South. What lessons can we draw from this? MacDonald shares:

“First and foremost is the growing clarity of a Gospel shaped identity unique to the indigenous nations. . . . There is, with these developments, a renewal of appreciation for the God given authority that has always existed among the aboriginal nations. This authority, sometimes called sovereignty, is a direct repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery. With many, especially in a religious context, there is evidence of a unique awareness of the larger mission to humanity and the rest of Creation that this authority bears with it.”

Is this just another negative rhetoric against the West? MacDonald’s proposal is refreshingly creative. He discovers a new basis for the gospel mandate. It arises from a new understanding of sovereignty, “the authority and power to respond to the Creator’s call to serve Creation”, that stands in sharp contrast to “the understanding of sovereignty generally present among the modern nation states”. He explains this more fully in his presentation to the 2001 General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada: God’s mission is not centered on Jerusalem. The Spirit “redirects God’s traffic from the temple to every village, to every home, to every heart, by respecting the authority of land, language and culture that throughout scripture is treated as sacred and God-given”.¹

With this awakening comes responsibility. MacDonald says:

“This dramatic expansion of mission results in a sense of responsibility for all humanity and all of Creation, a clear imperative in Scripture that is given too little attention in recent Western missions. There is, along with this broad sense of mission, a sincere desire to deepen communion with other Christians and cultures, not to separate from them. The paradox of a growing sense of aboriginal identity is a more intimate sense of world community. But with this sense of global membership and leadership, there is, with great passion, a commitment to reconciliation and healing among the People of the Land.”

He ends with seven touchstones for creating “a North American home for the Gospel of Jesus”. In brief:

1. “A robust awareness that God has, is, and will be present among the People of the Land.
2. A recognition that God has acted definitively in the survival of the People of the Land. . . . Their on-going life is a prophetic act of witness against the materialism and avarice of our age.
3. A denunciation of the Doctrine of Discovery and an end to measuring aboriginal church development by Western models.
4. The boundaries of Native church life should reflect and respect the boundaries of the People of the Land. The churches of the West must do more than affirm the authority and validity of the First

Nations as it relates to other Nations and States. They must recognize it among themselves.

5. The Spirit of God has and will develop leaders among the People of the Land.
6. The Land is sacred and a gift from God. We must recognize sacred place, history, and ecology. . . .
7. The spiritual and moral authority of the aboriginal nations of the Americas . . . must shape the decision-making and the actual shape of these factors. This discernment must be both tribal and consensual, not imposed from above.”

A response: on claiming the gift outright

Bishop MacDonald’s essay has a North American readership in mind. Yet, “Global South” churches have much to learn from what he shares. What can churches in Africa, South America, and Asia learn from the spiritual journey of the churches of the First Nations in North America?

How can Christians – and indeed our wider communities, societies and nations – pick up their lives and move on from the wrongs suffered? We find little in MacDonald’s paper hint of any resentment against the West. Rather he moves out of that shadow to embrace a vision for the Christian church. His proposal has two important messages to Global South churches.

First, on sovereignty. God’s “larger mission” to humanity and the rest of the Creation provides the underpinning for the church’s identity. Conservatives may be concerned with his seeming silence on the authority of the written Word of God. Indeed, he does not refer to the creedal statements at all. I suggest however this is due not so much for his neglect of orthodoxy, but for a concern that our understanding of the Christian faith must be more radically shaped by the wider horizons. The land, culture and language are God’s sacred gift to us. Such must shape the pattern of discipleship and worship and ecclesial structures of the Christian church. Indeed, we need to recognize so far our expressions of the faith have been shaped by the “churches of the West”.

MacDonald, as a Bishop from the First nation, challenges the mentality of a golden past. Our continuing engagement and identification with the land, culture, and language – God’s very gifts to humanity – will open up new worlds of understanding.

Second, on the context of our doctrinal and ecclesiastical insistence. Bishop MacDonald advocates structural changes in the Anglican Church: “The spiritual and moral authority of the aboriginal nations of the Americas, especially as they relate to their own, must shape the decision-making and the actual shape of these factors.” This demand goes hand in hand however with a widening of horizons in mission. The growing sense of aboriginal identity should lead to deeper communion with other Christians, cultures, and indeed to healing and reconciliation within the wider communities. Here I find myself in complete agreement with Bishop MacDonald. I tried to spell out similar concerns in my recent essay “Till they have homes”.² Churches in the Global South live in societies mutilated by histories of racial and religious conflicts. What has the Gospel to offer? Or what right has the Church to

continue speaking in such societies unless our emerging global leadership leads to a commitment “to serve Creation”, as MacDonald suggests?

How then should Christians live? What is the form of Christian leadership and servanthood in these trying times? I refer here not to the Communion crisis but to the unfolding of human tragedies in the world. MacDonald and many present-day Chinese Christians share similar outlook. Hymns from the Western churches often portray Christian discipleship in crusading terms. “Stand up, stand up for Jesus”, “Fling out the banner, let it float” and suchlike are part of the staple diet in Sunday worship. Such conquest sentiment is strikingly absent in Chinese hymns. In its place, humanity’s relation with nature, filial love to God, social responsibilities, and self-sacrifice provide guiding themes in Christian living. Pastor Wang Weifan’s hymns are a case in point.³ Indeed, he had suffered with many other Chinese during the Cultural Revolution. One could say, he “wasted” years in doing apparently meaningless duties in rural areas. Yet he did not choose to launch bitter attack on those who wronged him. He came to see the hardship suffered was a crucible that led him to a closer bond with the people and to a deeper walk with Jesus.

Churches in the Anglican Communion – in both East and West – have tried to understand what the Gospel is. It is “a gift outright”, all would agree. Robert Frost’s lyrics “Possessing what we still were unpossessed by, / Possessed by what we now no more possessed” could well summarize the story of Christianity from a human stand point. Indeed, men gave themselves outright, and turned the “deed of gift” into “many deeds of war”. Our possessing could as well lead to dispossession for others. This would however grossly misunderstand and misrepresent God.

“The gift outright” is not our private possession. We receive it as a pledge from God for the human community. Saint Paul offers a vision for the mission mandate in Ephesians. God calls his New People to move out of Jerusalem – the orthodox centre of the faith – to the towns and villages in the remotest ends of the earth, to share with them that they are “no longer strangers and aliens”, but “citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). Such duty compels Jesus’ disciples to cherish the place, history and ecology of the lands they find themselves in. Distant from the Temple, the City and the Land of Israel, there God calls his People to build a “dwelling place for God” “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets; with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20-21). “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).”

Hence, God’s gift is not open to our manipulation. Bishop MacDonald shared in his essay the triumph of God’s sovereign love over human folly among the aboriginals in North America. It was a story of overcoming evil with good. It makes no sense to adopt ideological machineries to launch hostile attacks against those whom we disagree with. We would not so do against those of other faiths; how much more should we be generous to fellow Christians. Vilification serves no purpose other than to incite hatred; in extreme cases, it leads to genocides and wasteful destruction. The Cultural Revolution was a case in point; it left China in ruins. If our common humanity cannot awake us to love, then the Anglican Communion is lost; indeed everything is lost in (political) transitions. We would be turning our back to the world

that God loved. Yet not all is lost. God's "gift outright" remains his sovereign gift to the meek (Matthew 5:5).

It takes a First Nation Christian to remind me that. Thanks be to God for that unbroken bond.

Fifth Anniversary of Nine-Eleven, 2006
Singapore

¹ See Mark MacDonald, "Doctrine of Discovery Event," Anglican Church of Canada, General Synod 2001, <http://generalsynod.anglican.ca/gs2001/rr/presentations/macdonald.html>.

² Michael Poon, "Till they have Homes: Christian Responsibilities in the Twenty-first Century," Global South Anglicans, http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/weblog/comments/till_they_have_homes/.

³ See my webpage (under construction) on Rev. Wang Weifan in the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia, Trinity Theological College website: http://www.ttc.edu.sg/csca/rart_doc/china/wangweifan.htm.