

Read Archbishop Justin's apology to the Indigenous peoples of Canada

02/05/2022

Read the Archbishop's apology delivered at an Indigenous Gathering in Prince Albert yesterday during his visit to Canada.



I am here today with a heart filled with a sense of darkness, shame and sadness, to acknowledge the hurt done to your people. To apologise for the damage caused to your communities... and to recognise the grievous sins of the Church of England in its historic form against the First Nations, the Inuit and the Métis people of Canada.

I've listened to the stories of grief and humiliation. They have been sacred stories. This has been a sacred room. A place of holiness in which sin committed has been brought to light - and structural sin, not just individual sin, which has been terrible enough. Structural in society and, worse still, in the Church. Sins of racism and discrimination. The greatest evils we can face.

In those stories I have seen the scars you bear, caused by the deep wounds that we have inflicted upon you. I have felt a touch of the shadow of the pain handed down to you by the Church's actions and behaviours. Only those who were there and lived through it know the pain.

<https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-writing/speeches/read-archbishop-justins-apology-indigenous-peoples-canada>

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I am utterly consumed by admiration at the bravery and the strength it takes to work towards healing and restoration from a place of brokenness and betrayal - and to start that with such holy openness and sharing of the past. During these last many hours there have been moments where the speakers have fallen silent because they could not carry on. I felt that those silences were not moments of hesitation, but moments of the fulness of the presence of our Creator God. Moments of extraordinary power in which the silence of this room was complete.

So I wish again, truly and deeply, and with humiliation as well as humility, to apologise for the broken relationship between the Church of England and the First Nations, the Inuit and the Métis peoples of Canada. We did not fulfil our historic commitment to be an advocate, ally and relative for you. Instead of standing with you, we abandoned you.

Instead of advocating for you, we became complicit in, and often directly responsible for, residential schools - uninspected, unsupervised, uncriticised, unchallenged in the cruelties they handed out indiscriminately to the most innocent and the youngest. The isolation of people groups on reserves. In the midst of great poverty, the Church shrugged its shoulders and contributed to further hardship.

We promised to walk with Indigenous, Inuit and Métis people. To advocate for them as you would do a family member. We do, after all, talk of being brothers and sisters in Christ. That is what God calls us. But we shrugged off that call. The chasm between the lived reality of experience of the First Nations, the Métis and the Inuit now, and what could have been - legally, culturally, intellectually, structurally, in infrastructure, in every area of life, in the experience of generations - in the amount of suicide, in mental illness, in politics, in respect - the difference between what could have been and what is comes down to many things no doubt, but here and now a major contributor has been the Church failing to keep its promises.

That chasm between what could have been and what is, is shaming and devastating. It has led to the attempted liquidation of intergenerational links, culture, spirituality and much more. We have heard that today so eloquently and so powerfully from so many.

Never have I sat and listened to so many stories in which suicide is normative. Never - and I come from a family where both my parents are alcoholics; my father died and my mother has not drunk for 54 years, so I know alcoholism - never have I heard so many people talk of their own addictions.

And it was acknowledged openly, admitted powerfully and talked of clearly as the attempt to escape from the horrors of memory and lived experience. I understand that from my own experience.

I would also like to echo and repeat the words of those who have apologised previously, whilst lamenting that these apologies have been so necessary and so overdue. In 1993, Archbishop Michael Peers presented an apology for the Church of Canada's role in residential schools, an apology repeated in 2010 by Archbishop Fred Hiltz, who spoke of the "shame that we still carry as a church and as a people."

Just three years ago, Archbishop Fred apologised for the spiritual harm done to indigenous communities as a result of the cultural and spiritual arrogance and cruelty that belittled and abused your

people and did not recognise the presence of God in your traditions, the richness of your spirituality and the strength and depth of your belief.

If anyone wanted evidence of that they would only have had to sit this afternoon or yesterday and heard time and time again the words of grace expressed towards the Church. And an utterly undeserved acknowledgement towards this archbishop for making an easy journey and sitting and listening.

The presence of grace is always the greatest sign of the presence of God. The indisputable sign. The absence of grace, referred to by one of those who spoke, is a proof of people who knew nothing of God in what they did.

History cannot truly be in the past until it has been fully healed. New atrocities continue to come to light. I know the past is deeply present in your lives, your memories and your expressions of life and culture. I know you carry the weight of generations of grief and trauma.

I know that the residential schools and the Church at times sought deliberately to do what in the Bible is condemned, which is to break down the memory of generations so you lose your identity. That was another word heard much today.

I am so sorry that the Church participated in the attempt, the failed attempt - because you rose above it and conquered it - to dehumanise and abuse those we should have embraced as brothers and sisters.

I cannot begin to describe my near-despair at hearing of the vestry of a church voting that it did not want “Indian people” in its presence. Dear God. The God who inspired the scriptures that say in the church there is neither Jew or Greek, slave nor free, Scythian nor Barbarian, but all are one in Christ. Dear God.

I am sorry that the Church was not there for you when we should have been your greatest friends. And even if we were powerless, and I will come back to that, we should have been willing to suffer alongside you. That is better than nothing.

I am sorry that the Church belittled your spirituality, denigrated and undermined your culture, traditions and above all your languages, and abused your rights.

And I am sorry that an eagerness to share the good news of Jesus Christ we committed an indefensible sin of the arrogant assumption that we ‘brought God to you’ rather than understanding and seeking to listen. I’m not sure who has more right to be offended - the God who was already here, or you who knew that God.

And Senator, you showed how the Doctrine of Discovery set a pattern and culture for the history of Europe - from the beginning of the 16th century till the middle of the 20th century. And still the after-effects of that catastrophic nuclear explosion, the fall-out continues in the systems of our economy and our structures, as you showed so clearly. Thank you, I had seen it but not understood it, and you spoke it so brilliantly.

“I am more very humbled - it’s an inadequate word, I don’t know what the right word is - I am more than humbled, I find it unbelievable - that you are even willing to attempt to listen to this apology, and

to let us walk with you on the long journey of renewal and reconciliation. It will not be an easy or quick journey, but I do commit to walking with you for as long as the Lord gives me strength so to do.”

As you know as well as I, the Doctrine of Discovery spread its pernicious darkness and evil across the whole world. Pastor Ray Minniecon, an Aboriginal pastor based in Australia, said recently in a conversation in which I was involved: ‘Apologies are cheap, if not offensive, unless they are accompanied by action.’ There is no hierarchy in suffering. There is no one whose suffering makes them more or less important than others. There is simply the impact of injustice and the need for healing, and the need to learn.

And so I will make some hesitant commitments. I understand we need to match action with words. I commit for my part, as much as I am able, that I will do that in partnership - not from a distance, working out what you need and doing it to do - so that I can learn more from you what you would like that shared future to look like.

I cannot speak, Senator, entirely to the challenges you gave, because they are not within my gift to control. Canada and its relations with the First Nations, the Métis and the Inuit, is not within the jurisdiction of anyone except those people. I will not insult you by consciously promising what I cannot deliver. One of the big differences between the Anglican Communion - of which the Church of England is a small part - and the Roman Catholic Church is that I am defined as the ‘first among equals’. I am not the Pope who has jurisdiction over every part of the Roman Catholic Church.

So I commit secondly to work with the Primate and to go on listening directly and indirectly, and to learn what we should do, and to the extent it is within my power to do something, I will.

And let me be clear, I’ve learned recently from bad experience in England that there will be things even within the Church that I cannot change. It’s a long story but I’ll cut it short. In one of the chapels of a college at Cambridge University - Jesus College, ironically - there is a monument to a major donor, a beneficiary of the college in the 18th Century. He earned his money, or sought to earn his money over his life, through trading in slaves. It’s a huge monument: one and a half tonnes of marble. For reasons you will understand in the depths of your being, those who came from the Caribbean and West Africa found themselves unable to worship in that chapel, when to get into it they had to look at this monument to the one who had been a formative figure in enslaving their ancestors.

The head of the college is a descendant of slaves from Barbados. So they sought to get legal permission to move the monument - but being good historians, not to throw it in the tip but to put it up outside the chapel, outside the sacred place of worship, in the cloisters with signs around it and digital displays to help people think through the issues and why this was so bad. It seems, I would expect to you as to me, an obvious decision and a very gracious one by those who were offended.

But a high court judge in a Church of England court decided, for reasons I have read but struggle with, that it could not be moved. I had appealed for it to be moved. The bishop [of Ely] had appealed for it to be moved. It’s not been moved. I say this not to distract you but to say that even on things that are as blatantly obvious, and as easy and straightforward, as saying that there should not be memorials in churches that stop worship for those who seek to find Christ - even that does not always happen. But

what I did on that occasion, which has got me into a fair amount of trouble in the press, was to side with those who wanted to move the monument.

So the least I promise is that even where we cannot change things, I will support and encourage the support of the First Nations, the Métis and the Inuit in seeking justice. I will stand with you, while I am in post, even if we fail.

At the Lambeth Conference in July, one of the key things we will be discussing - along with evangelism, discipleship, climate change and other issues - is the rights of Indigenous peoples around the world. I will encourage commitment by the whole Anglican Communion on this subject and for it to be part of our priorities.

We have something called the Anglican Indigenous Network which has a very powerful link with the United Nations. I will see with them what better working groups can be convened to raise this issue at the United Nations - it's already on their agenda, but can we make it even more important? If that is what you and others want.

In order to support practical implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and integrate that declaration into the life of the Anglican Communion, I commit to defending those rights with world leaders, commercial organisations as well as the UN.

I commit to doing everything I can to ensure the stories of Indigenous communities are respectfully heard and widely told, building on the prophetic work already being carried out. And as I say, at the Lambeth Conference, one focus will be on Indigenous people.

And the reason for that is not some kind of charitable "Ah, they're there, we're going to try and do something useful" - quite the reverse: without Indigenous people's full participation in the life of the Church, the Church is not fully the Church of Christ. Without you we are less. We are inadequate. The Communion is impoverished and we deny the reality of God.

There is more to learn than I can say. Not only from the things I would have anticipated - family and community in a world that is so often atomised and individualistic. Your spirituality in connection with climate change. But I have heard over these two days that we have to learn from you about reconciliation, healing and forgiveness, and growth, grace and love, and patience.

As I have been talking my mind has been saying me all the way through, "This is not good enough." But I want to under-promise and over-deliver as I said yesterday. And I hope that what I have said may be the beginning of the beginning of a deeper conversation in words and action. The conversation must include apology but it must not stop there.

In humility, in deep sadness, I end as I began: by apologising unreservedly and unqualifiedly, and saying again to you that even where I cannot change things, I will do everything I can to stand alongside and continue to learn from you. Thank you.