



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog

For the Sixth Sunday After Trinity - July 11, 2021

"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."

Revelation 21:4 (KJV)

Twenty-seven years ago, this month, I found myself standing at the only set of traffic lights north of 60 degrees latitude. They're located on Mackenzie Avenue in downtown Inuvik in the Northwest Territories. Although it was almost two o'clock in the morning, the sun was still shining as brightly as if it were noon. (You see, in Inuvik the sun doesn't set at all for 56 days from late June until early August). Anyway, I had just finished spending a total of nine days in Inuvik and I was just starting to feel a little less like the "southern rookie" that, in fact, I still was. For example, I hardly even flinched when only a few hours earlier I had shelled out \$12.50 (or the equivalent of about \$23 today) for my meagre supper of a caribou burger, French fries, and a coke. Perhaps more telling was the fact that - after having spent the previous three weeks in the MacKenzie River Delta on the coast of the Beaufort Sea feeding relentless hordes of flying insects - I barely noticed the ever-present, but much smaller, swarms of mosquitoes and black flies which relentlessly buzzed around me, looking for any piece of exposed flesh upon which to enjoy a late-night meal.

Instead, as I stood waiting for the Mackenzie Avenue traffic lights to change, I focused my attention upon the now-familiar sights of downtown Inuvik:

- ☞ the dusty potholed unpaved streets;
- ☞ the blocks of orange, purple, and pink row houses each with its own junk-infested yard;
- ☞ the large above-ground utility pipes called “utilidors” that couldn’t be buried in the perma-frost, and like some giant landlocked octopus connected all the buildings;
- ☞ the Inuvik town park with its sparse brown grass, a few scraggly bushes, and a weather-beaten bench; and
- ☞ the endless procession of dirty pickup trucks that cruised up and down Mackenzie Avenue, each with its own cracked windshield courtesy of the gravel surfaced Dempster Highway that links Inuvik to Dawson City in the Yukon Territory, 775 kilometres and 17 hours away to the southwest.

Yes, I was feeling less like a southern rookie every minute. I wish I could say I was getting used to the place, but, in truth, I wasn’t. I’m not really sure that I ever could. For as I looked around, I couldn’t help but see the real face of Inuvik – her indigenous people:

- ☞ Mostly poor, sad, downtrodden, or oppressed in some way (indeed, the Dene and Inuit people I met and spoke with all seemed to suffer from abuse of some sort – whether physical, emotional, sexual, or substance).
- ☞ Mere children, two to five years of age, ran around, unattended, at all hours of the night.

☞ Young adolescent girls, no more than 13 years old, dressed provocatively and patrolled Mackenzie Avenue looking for **any** excitement. (One of the locals told me that Inuvik did not have any prostitution; apparently, it couldn't survive as an industry, as the girls preferred to give away their sexual favours for free. Moreover, it was a particular status symbol for them if the man was white and married, as he wouldn't be "sticking around." And it was an even bigger bonus if the girls became pregnant, for at least their babies would be of "some worth," as they **would have less native blood coursing through their veins.**)

To top it all off, only the day before, I had learned that the latest Anglican priest had finally made it to Inuvik – the faithful people of the little "Parish of the Ascension" having been without clergy for almost a year. Evidently, he showed up long enough to drop his suitcase inside the door of the rectory and then announce that he was leaving – **immediately** – for his long-overdue six weeks' vacation.

And suddenly, while standing at that lone set of traffic lights on Mackenzie Avenue, the immensity of everything I had witnessed during my nine days in Inuvik struck me – HARD. For at that very moment, I was confronted by the face of Inuvik, and compelled, finally, to look deep into her eyes.

Well, I did look, and then I did the only thing I could do; I wept.



Twenty-one years ago, this month, my family and I were driving west through Northwestern Ontario, along Highway 11 toward Thunder Bay (our home at the time). Just before arriving in the town of Longlac, we encountered a peaceful demonstration that "forced" us to take a detour through the Long Lake #58 First Nation reserve. And to

say the least, what we saw during the next few minutes greatly upset and disturbed us:

- ☞ homes built on a square mile of swamp – most of them abandoned, windows and doors boarded up, unlivable and condemned because of unsanitary conditions and black mould;
- ☞ one small church and elementary school, both badly in need of paint and repair;
- ☞ children – of all ages – wandering aimlessly along the dusty streets; and
- ☞ adults looking dazed, and frustrated, and forlorn.

While driving slowly through Long Lake #58 First Nation, I chanced to put my window down (as the day was hot), and one young man, seeing my clergy shirt and collar, came right up to me and pleaded:

“Father, please pray for me.”



Three years ago, this month, I read the 2017 national bestselling book by acclaimed author Tanya Talaga entitled, “Seven Fallen Feathers: racism, death, and hard truths in a northern city.” A newspaper journalist at the Toronto Star for 23 years (covering everything from general city news, to education, national healthcare, foreign news, and “Indigenous affairs”), Talaga is of Polish and Indigenous descent.

- ☞ Her great-grandmother was a residential school survivor.
- ☞ Her great-grandfather was an Ojibwe trapper and labourer.

- ☞ Her grandmother is a member of Fort William First Nation (a reserve along the bank of the Kaministiquia River, which borders Thunder Bay to the south).
- ☞ And her mother lived “off the land” with her family, having been raised in the woods near the small Northern Ontario railroad stops of Raith and Graham.

Initially delving into the history of Thunder Bay, a city that has come to manifest Canada’s long struggle with human rights violations past and present against Indigenous communities, Talaga’s book then painstakingly details – over the span of ten years, from October 2000 to February 2011 – the deaths of seven First Nations high school students in Thunder Bay, five of whose bodies were found dead in the local rivers that flowed into Lake Superior below a sacred Indigenous site. The seven teen-aged students were hundreds of miles away from their families, having been forced to leave their homes and live in a foreign – **and most unwelcoming** – city to further their education, as there were no local reserve high schools for them to attend. In each of the seven cases, post-mortem autopsies were either:

- ☞ not properly performed; or
- ☞ not performed at all.

Yet, **within mere hours of finding the students’ lifeless bodies**, the Thunder Bay Police Service announced that their deaths were deemed to be “not suspicious.” In other words, every single one of the seven First Nations students’ deaths (in the estimation of the local police, anyway) were accidental and, therefore, **not as a result of foul play**. Bearing this in mind, I would like to share an excerpt from the book, found on pages 233-236, about an incident that took place in Thunder Bay in 2008 – an incident that, mercifully, did not result in yet another indigenous student’s death.

“On October 28, 2008... sixteen-year-old Darryl Kakekayash was beaten severely and tossed into the Neebing River (Like some of the boys who had earlier been found dead,) Darryl was living in a boarding home, far away from his home community, his family, his language – away from everything he’d known in Weagamow, or North Caribou, First Nation. And like all the other boys before him, because Darryl wanted to go beyond a grade eight education he had to head south. He first went to high school in Sault Ste. Marie, but the school was too far away from home; so in 2007, he transferred to Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School (in Thunder Bay). And, just like the other boys, Darryl bounced around from boarding house to boarding house.

“On October 28, barely two months after the start of school, Darryl met his cousin and his cousin’s girlfriend at Silver City (a local movie theatre). They were going to catch an evening showing of Alvin and the Chipmunks. It was a bit of a blast from past, but they thought the movie would be a riot.

“When the movie ended, Darryl worried he’d be late for his midnight curfew, so he decided to take a shortcut back to his boarding home. He beetled quickly through a golf course down by the Neebing River. As he got near a footbridge, he heard some rustling. Three white men approached and asked him if he had a smoke.

“He did and he gave it to them.

“Then they asked Darryl if he was in the Native Syndicate (a Thunder Bay gang) because he was wearing their colours, white and black. Darryl was decked out in white track pants, white runners, and a white sweater with a panda on the chest and black stripes on the sleeves. The white pants also had black lines down the side. He had just purchased the sweater at the local mall.

“He told them he was not part of a gang.

“The men demanded to see his arms. They wanted to see if he had any tattoos indicating gang membership.

“Darryl refused and told them that he didn’t need to show them anything because he wasn’t in a gang. Again, he repeated he wasn’t in the Native Syndicate.

“The men didn’t like his answer. They began to beat him, punching, hitting, and kicking him to the ground. One ran at him with a wooden two-by-four and struck it across his back. Darryl fell to his knees. Another man kicked him in the stomach. He remembers they yelled racial slurs, calling him, ‘Crazy Native (expletive), you dirt’ and threatening him, ‘You are going to get your (expletive) kicked now, do you like this now?’

“Darryl was screaming for help but no one came. He thought he was going to die right there by the river. Then one of the men gave him a solid punch in the face before all three of them began dragging Darryl toward the river.

“They heaved him up and tossed him into the ice-cold water, then hauled him out again, beat him some more, and threw him back in.

“Darryl’s broken body began to go into shock. He remembers looking at the water and seeing a shiny reflection on the surface: ice was forming. Suddenly he was so, so cold. This is it, he thought. Nobody is hearing me.

“He tried to swim but the pain in his back was too intense. He struggled to stand and was buoyed by the realization that the water was only up to his belly button. But his shoes were sticking to the muddy river floor. The ground was so slimy, his entire foot sank downward when he stood up. It was as if he was walking in quicksand. One shoe came off and then he lost the other.

“He made it to the grass and the rocks. His feet were so cold and painful, it felt like he was standing on steel daggers. He started to

crawl on the grass on his belly, moving as fast as he could to the road. He tried to flag down a car but no one stopped. Then he saw an out-of-service bus coming toward him. He stood in the middle of the road and waved his arms.

“When the bus came to a stop, Darryl begged the driver not to call the police but to take him home. He was petrified that if he told the police what had happened, somehow the three men would come looking for him.

“Darryl's pleas worked. Petrified and in shock, he started to cry.

“When he got off the bus, he ran to his boarding home.

It wasn't until the next day, when he was back at school, that he told the principal, Jonathan Kakegamic, what had happened. Jonathan told Darryl he needed to tell the police or this would happen again to other students. Darryl relented.

“The principal called the police, who came to the school to interview Darryl. They told him that they would get right on the case and keep him informed of any developments.

“It would take years for the police to contact Darryl again. The Ontario Provincial Police called to interview him about his experience so it could be included in the inquest regarding the deaths of the seven (Dennis Franklin Cromarty) students.

“Soon after Darryl was attacked, his mother flew to Thunder Bay from Weagamow to take her son home. She would not let her son complete his high school education in Thunder Bay.

“To date, no one has been charged for Darryl's assault.”



I've pondered, and prayed, and soul-searched at myriad times over the past 27 years:

- ☞ about what I experienced in July 1994 during my time in Inuvik;
- ☞ about the young man and the critical situation, not only at Long Lake #58 First Nation in July 2000, but in way-too-many of this country's First Nations reserves just like it that I've seen since;
- ☞ about what I read in July 2018 in Tanya Talaga's extremely heart-wrenching and thought-provoking book;
- ☞ **but, mostly**, about the recent "rediscovery" of over 1,000 unmarked graves of indigenous children and babies who were literally stolen from their families – **often at gunpoint** – by agents of the Church, the RCMP, and various Canadian federal and provincial governments, and then were forced to attend residential schools (where they faced untold, evil horrors of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse – before their broken little bodies ultimately succumbed to the relentless torture, and died, and were relegated to an ignominious mass burial, without their families ever learning their wretched, pitiable fate)

Especially this past week in light of St. Luke 6:31, a verse from the Gospel Lesson normally appointed for today, being, "The Sixth Sunday After Trinity":

"Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Words uttered by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself that clearly lay out for us, as Matthew Henry (a late 17th century and early 18th century Welsh Nonconformist minister and author) commented:

"What we should expect, in reason, to be done to us, either in justice or charity, by others, if they were in our condition and we in theirs,

that, as the matter stands, we must do to them. We must put our souls into their souls' stead, and then pity and succour them, as we should desire and justly expect to be ourselves pitied and succoured."

Sadly, our Modern World has altered – even bastardized – the words of our Lord Jesus to now read:

"Do to others BEFORE they do to you."

Truly, I can't help but think of the attitude that many white people (some even **outside** The Church) still possess toward the indigenous peoples of our country – an attitude shared, I'm ashamed to admit, by members of my own family while I was growing up, and one that was graphically on display in a "TikTok" video I chanced to view just last evening:

"Thank God, I'm not like them: uneducated, lazy, drunken good-for-nothing, welfare bums. They can't even look after their homes or their belongings. Their yards are never mowed and are always full of garbage. Yet they always wanting another government handout, so they can buy some more booze and KFC. Why don't they just get a job like the rest of us and help themselves?!?"

Funny, but I can't share – or, even, understand – this unspeakably inhumane attitude toward our indigenous brothers and sisters, especially when I contemplate:

- ☞ what I read in Tanya Talaga's book;
- ☞ what I heard first-hand in the voice of a desperate young man at Long Lake #58 First Nation who sought my prayers; and
- ☞ what I viscerally witnessed in Inuvik.

Beyond any shadow of a doubt, these most profound experiences

have all conspired to make me ask myself many questions. And, again, this July – ashamedly, the appalling “27th anniversary” of my woefully glacier-like spiritual awakening concerning Canada’s indigenous population – the same haunting questions, **still to my disgrace unanswered**, have bubbled once more to the surface:

☞ “What can I do?”

☞ “What should I do?”

☞ “What is God asking me to do here?”

☞ “I just can’t sit around and do nothing, can I?”

It also shouldn’t have taken the recent revelations of 1,000 (and counting) indigenous children’s unmarked graves to make me finally realize that I am a big part of the problem – because I’m responsible for participating in the election of provincial and federal governments who allow this untenable, outrageous situation to exist, and I’m part of a privileged culture that consistently denies indigenous people the ability to succeed in that culture.

Well, 27 years (**almost three decades**) have passed and, admittedly, all I’ve managed to spare is a few, paltry, sporadic, moments of “thoughts and prayers” on behalf of:

☞ the indigenous people of Inuvik;

☞ the young man and his suffering community at Long Lake #58 First Nation (and all other First Nations reserves in Canada);

☞ the seven dead teen aged First Nations high school students in Thunder Bay;

☞ the 1,000-plus dead residential school children; and

☞ the hundreds of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls.

Indeed, for all indigenous people across this country.

Truly, the time has come for less “thoughts and prayers” and a lot more tangible, meaningful “action.” Let us, then – as true Christians, as sincere followers of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ – be (in the timely words of the Mennonite Central Committee of Canada):

“...committed to addressing the legacy of harm done to Indigenous Peoples by churches and governments and to forging right relationships.”

As we all have – **and have had for nearly 2,000 years** – our Divine marching orders:

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

For sooner than we realize, one glorious and extraordinary day:

“God shall wipe away all tears from (our) eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”



Dearest Reader in Christ:

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