

MEN'S LENTEN RETREAT "Into *the Breach*" – March 30, 2019
HOMILY by Bishop Mark Hagemoen, Cathedral of the Holy Family, Saskatoon

Rev. Fathers, Brothers in our One Lord:

INTO THE BREACH

- Breach: a gap, threshold, encounter with conflict, difficulty, danger. It is characterized as the point of contact between conflicting armies, but also... different, contrasting, conflicting attitudes and dispositions, world views or philosophical systems that frame reality. Some of these contrast with each other drastically, and when they do, the breach may be a very tumultuous ...and dangerous place!

Years ago, when the movie "Gladiator" was released, I was impressed with the opening scene of the military breach or gap between the Roman Army and the Germanic barbarians. The war was on because the barbarians would not accept Roman rule. Another example of the terrible place of the breach comes from Viking history and folklore. Many of you may have heard to the breach in the context of Viking warfare, generally the place of the 'shield wall' This was a deadly, ruthless boundary: a threshold of encounter with the enemy. It was so crazy and vicious, that the faculties of reason and judgment were suspended by the use (really the abuse) of alcohol loaded mead – consumed abundantly by the warriors before the war was on – as well as a false sense of invincibility.

But what we mean by combat in the Christian life, and especially in the spiritual life means something ...more. Recall Brent Powell's challenge to us about the limits of our 'mental maps or mental images' as he explained last night how these relate to our images of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is also the problem, the limit regarding the mental map of what we mean by 'the Breach' and how we carry out 'combat' there.

There are many reflections by saints and theologians on the issue of spiritual combat. May I quote one that I often go to in my own spiritual reading, that I also quoted recently at a "Priest, Prophet, King" presentation a few months ago. It is by Fr. Jacques Phillipe, titled: "Searching for and Maintaining Peace: A small treatise on Peace of Heart." He states:

"Every Christian must be thoroughly convinced that his spiritual life can in no way be viewed as the quiet unfolding of an inconsequential life without any problems; rather it must be viewed as the scene of a constant and sometimes painful battle, which will not end until death - a struggle against evil, temptation and the sin that is in him. This combat is inevitable, but is to be understood as an extremely positive reality, because, as Saint Catherine of Siena says, 'without war there is no peace'; without combat there is no victory. And this combat is, correctly viewed, the place of our purification, of our spiritual growth, where we learn to know ourselves in our weakness and to know God in His infinite mercy.

This combat is the definitive place of our transfiguration and glorification.”

But if the spiritual combat of a Christian is sometimes rough, it is by no means the hopeless struggle of somebody who battles in blindness and solitude, without any certitude as to the result of this confrontation. Rather, it is the combat of one who struggles with the absolute certitude that the victory is already won, because the Lord is resurrected.

Indeed, there is a lot going on in Fr. Phillippe’s reflection about the battle that goes on in the spiritual life ... and this shapes and changes us, purifies us.

I was recently reading an article in *First Things* – a regular periodical – in accord with the mission and work as an educational institute aiming to advance religiously informed public philosophy. The article is authored by Peter Leithart of the Theopolis Institute – dedicated to cultural renewal through the renewal and witness of church life. The article reflects on the general cultural, political, social, and religious current that we are dealing with in contemporary culture, which he says is not really a culture of ‘anger’, so much as a culture of ‘contempt.’

Quoting Arthur C. Brooks in his recent book, “Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt”, Leithart states:

“When we’re angry, we try to fix what’s broken, and we think we can. These days, we’re past hoping for a fix, and are instead “addicted to political contempt.” Contempt doesn’t try to fix anything; it “seeks to exile . . . to mock, shame, and permanently exclude from relationships by belittling, humiliating, and ignoring.” Anger cares. Contempt says, “You disgust me. You are beneath caring about.”

I thought of this quote when Brent reflected earlier today that, ‘finding fault in ourselves and others ... like it is ‘buried treasure.’ Indeed, it is pretty difficult to move from this ‘false treasure,’ this ‘false god.’

Leithart continues: “Contempt isn’t good for the country. There’s a strong correlation between marital contempt and divorce. Contempt is, ‘sulfuric acid for love.’ We are headed for societal divorce court, and (we had better) reconcile before it’s too late.”

However, there is more to this solution than merely “...practicing warm-heartedness,” overcoming contempt through love. This author, pushing Arthur Brooks in his book, *Love Your Enemies*, says that the response must be more than agreeing about surfacing common-shared values and actions about “love in our time.” Leithart respectfully thinks this is not enough, and is in fact - naïve.

Leithart concludes that we cannot be merely left with an immanent salvation – one that merely focusses on reminding ourselves about our need to be loving and

civil. In other words – only begging the question. Leithart raises a fundamentally significant important point if we wish to find a way out of the culture of contempt: the solution and response to the culture of contempt, cannot merely be about by surfacing and building on “shared values.” We only stay “stuck!”

Leithart says that, if we only settle at finding common ground, this will inevitably leave us keeping religion and faith at arm’s length – when religion and faith hold the ultimate solution and response. As he states, : “An immanent salvation won’t save. Paradoxically, national renewal won’t happen unless a nation pursues ends that transcend the nation. America can’t be saved by devotion to America.” I found this very much resonated for me in thinking about our Canadian context – let alone the majority of the other political and social contexts in our world today.

I recall that Pope (now Saint) John Paul II predicted something similar during the destruction of the Berlin wall that marked the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989. A reporter noticed that the Holy Father did not look happy witnessing this day. When pressed as to why, JP II stated, “I am grateful to see the fall of godless communism, but I am worried about what will replace it. Godless capitalism is as terrible as godless communism. Both are real threats to our world.”

Indeed, we are now experiencing in our world today the challenges and limits of democracy and their political and economic features. Who would have imagined that the tyranny of the majority would now become such a threat? As we spiral back into wondering if authoritarian models may be the solution, men and women of Faith in Christ are again (and again, and again!) reminded of the third way. This way is no compromise, say, between the right and the left, between socialism and capitalism, between the individual and society – or whatever extremes one tries to propose. The third way is the incarnational way, the “Word made Flesh,” the Divine who is also fully human, who inserts and reveals Himself, God’s self – in human time and history. This third way is that of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is characterized as the “narrow gate” or “way.” It is also characterized as the wonderful, unique, and dangerous place, where only the Saviour boldly goes, where no one has gone before, and blazes a unique path – THE unique path - not merely for the sake of any one people’s or nation’s glory – but to a Kingdom that is “in this world, but beyond this world.”

So, the battle, brothers! We love, but not just to protect our own, because WE (all) are the Crown of God’s creation. And despite the loss of the state of original holiness and harmony, God in Jesus Christ is reliable and relentless in calling us back!

You may have heard of the fatal grizzly attack on a young mother, Valeri Theoret and her baby daughter in the Yukon last fall. The bear was old and sick, and was dying as it prepared to hibernate. It had eaten a porcupine ...which compounded its sickness and misery. There is not that much to fear from a healthy grizzly if you know how to live alongside bears ... but much if the grizzly is sick or desperate. Bishop Gary Gordon several years ago told me a similar story of one night, as he was

about to take his dog outside his house on the outskirts of Whitehorse for a regular walk – this time the dog, Merlin, went crazy and blocked the door. So, Bishop Gary decided not to go outside. The next day... he found bloody wolf scat. An old wolf was dying – isolated from the pack – and was staking out the Bishop’s house.

Our culture is becoming the cranky and the unhealthy – or more, the critically wounded and dying bear or wolf – and in its sickness is more dangerous and potentially lethal than ever. Some of the signs included the following:

- As already mentioned, finding fault in ourselves and others... like it is “buried treasure.”
- We are now pouring monies into mental health treatments – which is very important, and we need to do this. But it feels like we are pouring into a bucket that has so many holes! For example, alongside is the promotion and in some cases even legalizing those things and practices that we formerly treat as problematic and ‘off limits.’ You know the list, and it expands.

As we continue to lose our dignity (I again reflect on Brent’s comments) “... sin, guilt, shame rushes in, and may ‘take over,’” and then we get even more delusional and fallen. We take on the attitude, “I will do it my way! I will even ...take my life ... on my terms ...while I still have my dignity.”

Oh Wow, ...this is more than a slippery slope. We have turned wholly in the other direction from our ‘state of original holiness and harmony’ – indeed, we are instead marching away from the Breach, into darkness, death!

Features of our Response to “Into the Breach”

- 1) **Healthy Christian Community and Accountability** ...in community, about how we are doing acting, being like Christ.

Pope Francis: *On Holiness: How HOLINESS leads to joy:*

“Do not be afraid of holiness. It will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy. On the contrary, you will become what the Father had in mind when he created you, and you will be faithful to your deepest self. To depend on God sets us free from every form of enslavement and leads us to recognize our great dignity.” (Gaudete et Exsultate 32)

- 2) **Intimate relationship with the Lord.** – restoring the TRUST in our Creator ...from the time of Adam and Eve in the garden, who lost trust, and began to die in their hearts – involves really “getting on our knees.” There is nothing more refreshing, not only merely realizing that I am not the centre of the universe, but that the ONE who really is the centre of the universe is utterly trustworthy and capable of being there. And as the prodigal son

realizes... and I have the utter privilege in sharing in such blessing and glory
...because of HIM!

- 3) **Call to Healing (Ongoing Conversion of life and heart) ...** this never stops!
- Sacrament of Confession, Reconciliation.
 - Healing is not something that says, you have a problem that needs to be fixed, so that you can get back to 'normal' – *Healing is an ongoing journey. If you stop HEALING, you will not be healthy, whole.* Without healing, you may be dying!

Remember the words of our Scripture today have a common theme:

Hosea 6 concludes: “For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice... knowledge of God, rather than mere burnt offerings. And the words that conclude our Gospel, Luke 18: “O God, Be merciful to me, as Sinner.”

Be convinced of Jesus’s quality, his righteousness, and not my own self-righteousness... which can translate, “O God ...thank you that I am not like... the rest of humanity... I give, I tythe, I am right ...I...I....I...!!!”
May I never be my own “dead end.”

- 4) **Call to brave, servant-oriented, Christ-like leadership and service!**
This especially involves, as Brett highlighted later this afternoon, the call to bind the broken-hearted, and the call to do this in our families and communities where we live, where God has placed us. To be a servant-oriented Christ-like leader is also to reject a passivity that is false, that is not the way of manhood – that is not the way of Christ. Jesus Christ shows us many examples and ways in which he bravely and boldly engages that which is sinful, unacceptable, beneath human dignity, and involves a limited worship – instead of a worship that reveals the full gift of self to mission, to a real, abundant life.

I briefly reflect on an experience of this point. When I was the bishop of the NWT, every year, the Sahtu-Dene community of Deline on Great Bear Lake – has a spiritual pilgrimage. One year the elder and leader team met with me because they were concerned about the spiritual health of their men, especially their younger men. In response, one of the Dene leaders – himself also a Husband, father, and new grand-father –said the following to the young men gathered: “You men, especially you younger men ...need to know God’s call to you, and what your community needs from you. You are the priest of your family. You are the priest. You are the priest to your family!! - I noticed that all the young men shuddered! It seemed they had never really heard this ...from one of their community. The interesting other thing that happened is that I noticed that all of their wives, or in some cases partners, all of the women, nodded their heads subtly but clearly! I was reminded then, as

I am today: *every one of us is called to be a priest, one priest, or another priest!*

Remember: None of this removes us from the conflict, battle: but helps us engage what must not be fled from, and will also put us in that wonderful, terrible place, where our axe is sharp, our heart is full, and our spirit is resolute ... because we are what and where we should be!

CONCLUSION: *BLESSING*

May God grant that our lives be happy ones.
Not by shielding us from all sorrow and pain,
but by strengthening us to bear it, if it comes.
Not by making our paths easy,
but by making us sturdy enough to travel any path.
Not by taking hardship from us,
but by taking all cowardice and fear from our hearts.
Not by granting us unbroken sunshine,
but by keeping our faces bright and your heart full - even in the shadows.
Not by making our lives always pleasant,
but by showing us where persons and causes need us most,
and by making us anxious to be there.

Brothers, let us...with our Lord and God...and in communion ...
be in the Breach!