

## Sermon: Being Renewed Day by Day

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles PC, June 6th, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I have a hard time understanding the thinking of the Israelites, when they demanded Samuel, "Appoint for us, then, a king to govern us." Samuel was a godly man, holding the office of prophet, priest, and judge, a unique combination in the history of the people of God. He presided over the period of transition when Israel, more precisely when its system of governance, moved away from biblical judges to an uncertain kingship, roughly a thousand years before Christ.

At that time, Samuel was getting old. His two sons, initially appointed by Samuel as successors, were not God-fearing men. "*They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.*" So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel with this demand: "*Give us a king to govern us!*", and they added, "*just like other nations.*"

Under judges, the twelve tribes of Israel were governed loosely like a confederacy. Each tribe has a significant voice over the affair of the nation. God raised up judges, sort of like local heroes who were capable military leaders to rally the tribes in times of foreign incursion. Judges were also wise rulers, who were capable to mediate disputes on local matters.

Perhaps it was a mistake for Samuel to appoint his two sons—judges were, after all, not in the habit of passing on the office to their descendants. However, kingship was a different kind of sovereign. Kings do pass on their reigns to their offsprings. A king would normally maintain a standing army. In time of foreign invasion, the army would go out to fight under the king's leadership—a feature that was desirable to the Israelites, so they themselves would not have to. However, the cost of that feature was high.

When the Israelites came to Samuel with their demand, "give us a king", Samuel was displeased, he felt rejected. He prayed to God for guidance, and was given a reply, "*Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.*" Israel did already have a king, God was their true king—their protector, their defender, and their saviour. The people of God was not rejecting Samuel as a leader, they were rejecting God as

their ruler. Nevertheless, God instructed Samuel to *'listen to the voice of the people'* a second time, but only solemnly warn them, and spell out to them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.

Some commentators have compared those warnings like a 'fine print'. For us, living in an internet-driven society with consumer-driven mindset, fine prints are designed to be disregarded, when they inconveniently pop up at times. We are so busy with our lives, so used to getting instant service on-line, whoever has the time to read those legal mumble-jumbles, whoever has the clarity of mind to comprehend them. I once made the mistake of trying to read a set of 'fine print'. Never again! Even with my university education in finance, and later a master degree in divinity, I could not make sense of those small and excruciating painful minutia. What I understood mostly, was the company that produces those fine prints knows how to protect itself, at the expense of the would be customers.

However, the 'fine print' that God instructed Samuel to convey to the Israelites was clear, concise, to the point, and meant to protect the people of God,

*"These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you:  
he will take your sons and appoint them  
to his chariots and to be his horsemen...  
He will take your daughters  
to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.  
He will take the best of your fields  
and vineyards and olive orchards  
and give them to his courtiers...  
He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves."*

You will note that I was jumping there a bit. If you want to read the whole thing, it is there, finely printed in the bulletin. But here is the most important part, God warned, *"And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day."*

It is interesting to note that God gave the people of Israel a choice. Much like when God first created the humankind, God gave us the freedom to choose. Much like when the psalmist laid out the two paths in Psalm 1 — the path of 'tov', of good, versus the path of 'ra', of bad. Much like when the Deuteronomist set out God's commandments, with corresponding

blessings for obedience, and corresponding curses for disobedience. There emerges a consistent pattern, almost a God-like nature from within the God-self, that is: **God gives choice to the people of God, and lays out clearly consequences of their choice.** So the Israelites were solemnly warned, yet they still insisted on their original demand, their choice—Give us a king!

That was the choice that the Indigenous people of Canada never got to make, never got to choose. They never asked for a king, yet more than one were imposed upon them. In the historical relationship between the indigenous and the non-indigenous people of Canada, the legacy of the residential school system is perhaps the most painful and the most telling.

Pastor and historian Peter Bush, in the article “The Native Residential School System and the Presbyterian Church in Canada”, published in 2004, outlined four primary reasons for the existence of Indian Residential Schools in the 19th and 20th centuries.

First, the disappearance of buffalos roaming the plains ended the nomadic lifestyle of the First Nations. Out of necessity, many tribes had to adapt to a farming lifestyle in order to stave off starvation. Second, inconsistent attendance at day schools, where students received education during the day and returned home in the evening. Third, the need to assimilate the next generation of native children into the settlers’ culture, that is the white Canadian culture. Finally, the model of Indian residential schools fit the missionary goal of the church, that is to evangelize those who were considered ‘uncivilized’.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada came late to the residential school scene, and were considered minor partners comparing to the Roman Catholic, the Anglican, and the Methodist. In total, 11 residential schools were Presbyterian operated. Most of them were transferred to the United Church in the union (or separation depending) of 1925. Two schools: the Birtle Residential School in Birtle, Manitoba and the Cecilia Jeffrey School in Kenora, Ontario, remained in the Presbyterian hands until 1969 when the Federal Government took sole responsibility.

The author of the article offered a number of critiques of the whole system. Insufficient and inconsistent funding from the government meant that schools were offering half-day education. Students were put into manual labor in farming, sewing, cleaning and other chores for long hours, just to maintain the financial viability of the schools. Consequently, the quality of education was poor. Most graduating native students were

nowhere near the comparable standard of white students. The long hours and the poor quality of education were made worse by the ill treatments of students by the staff. Harsh disciplines, abuses both physical and sexual were unfortunately common, leading to premature death for some. Being separated from their families and their own culture, loneliness was a common issue faced by students. Most were not integrating well into the social norm of the Canadian culture. As an evangelical tool, the author calls it statistically insignificant. Once students returned to their own communities, very few even attempted to share the Christian faith.

In case anyone may fault him for using contemporary standard to judge an institution of the past, the author offers up this assessment by the words of T.C. Ross, Principal of the Cecilia Jeffrey School, *"Here is an institution in which the government professes to be attempting to educate, and the church professes to be attempting to evangelize. The government grant is too small for an adequate staff of teachers. As a result education suffers. None but a few of the present staff attach due importance to the task of presenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ to these children."*

A damning indictment of the whole system of Indian Residential School, from the point of view of a knowledgeable insider, who ran one of the schools.

This past week has been hard for me, facing the news of the discovery of a possible mass grave in the former site of Kamloops Indian Residential School, containing perhaps 215 remains of children from the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation. Children that never should have been taken from their own community in the first place, children that never made it back home, from an institution that never loved them. This past week has been hard for me, as a clergy and as a human being.

The Kamloops school was not Presbyterian, it was run by the Catholic Church, which has up until very recently, steadfastly refused to apologize to residential school survivors. Just to be clear, the Presbyterian Church in Canada did offer its apology in a written 'Confession', back in 1994. Apology as such is an important first step to reconcile the relationship between the Church and the Indigenous people, but that relationship is far from settled. In next week's sermon, I will deal with more of that aspect of history.

I will say that in the past week, my own faith is sustained by the words of Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth, *"So we do not lose heart."*

*Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” (2 Corinthians 4:16)*

In the midst of multitude of problems that were pulling the church in Corinth apart, from both within and without, Paul was absolutely convinced that the Spirit of God is constantly at work, guiding our choices step-by-step, renewing our inner nature day-by-day. For what we, as the community of faith, are looking for and are striving towards is not what can be seen, as what can be seen is only temporary. What we are looking and striving together is what cannot be seen, what cannot be seen is eternal.

Yesterday (Saturday) morning, an email came into my inbox from the clerk of the Presbytery of Ottawa, announcing an interfaith vigil that same evening, to honour the memory of Indigenous children, who were victims of genocide. It was taking place in front of the Human Rights Monument, an event organized with the cooperation of Ottawa’s Indigenous community and the city’s diverse faith communities. I made a choice, even though the event came with very short notice, even though Saturday is usually my sermon writing day. I decided that I need to be there, I want to be there to bear witness.

Hundreds of people showed up, across various religions and faith traditions, young and old, men and women, all masked and socially distanced. Speakers spoke about their sadness and hope, some prayed, some sang. The organizer put up tiny red t-shirts hanging onto strings, 215 of them, each representing a long forgotten soul. Sound from a triangle bell rang throughout. Rain came, only a drizzle, not enough to wash away our collective grief.

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**