

5 May 2014
Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver
Vancouver School of Theology
Convocation Address by David J. Goa

The Good, the True, the Beautiful
John 14:5-17; Colossians 1:15-20

Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in Him were all things created, the things in the heavens and the things upon the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or authorities. All things. All things through Him and to Him have been created. And He is before all things, and in Him all things have come into existence. And He is the head of the body, the Church, Who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He might come to hold first place. For all the fullness was pleased to dwell in Him; and through him to reconcile all things to Him, having made peace through the blood of His Cross, through Him, whether the things on the earth or the things in the heavens.

(The Epistle of Saint Paul to the Colossians 1:15-20)

Thomas saith to Him, "Lord, we know not where Thou goest; and how can we know the way?" Jesus saith to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one cometh to the Father, except by Me. "If ye had known Me, ye would have known My Father also. And from now ye know Him, and have seen Him." Philip saith to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us." Jesus saith to him, "Am I so long a time with you, and thou hast not known Me, Philip? The one who hath seen Me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou, 'Show us the Father'? "Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words which I speak to you I speak not form Myself; but the Father Who abideth in Me, He doeth the works. "keep on believing Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me; otherwise keep on believing Me on account of the works themselves. "Verily, verily, I say to you, the one who believeth in Me, the works which I do shall that one do also; and greater works than these shall he do, because I go to My Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in My name, this will I do, that the Father might be glorified in the Son. "If ye should ask anything in My name, I will do it.

"If ye love Me, keep my commandments. "And I will ask the Father, and He shall give you another Paraclete, that He may abide with you forever – "the Spirit of the truth, Whom the world is not able to receive because it seeth Him not, nor knoweth Him; but ye know Him, for He abideth by you, and shall be in you."

(The Gospel of John 14:5-17)

The Reverend Doctor Richard Topping and the distinguished faculty and staff of Vancouver School of Theology

Recipients of the honorary degree [degree honoris causa]: the distinguished Chief Robert Joseph and distinguished Professor Doug Hall

Honored guests

And, you graduates, who come today to be clothed in the garment of VST, called as part of the body of Christ, called too to the life of our fragile world, the high calling for which you have been preparing yourselves.

We join together to bless each of you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Today we sit in the presence of women and men who have a sharpened sense of vocation.

It is not a new vocation and has little to do with credential or career. Rather, the vocation each of you received in baptism has been honed through your work at VST.

For the ancients' baptism was the hallmark of the Christian faith. And, what does it tell us both about our being as bearers of the divine image and about our vocation in service to the life of the world? Several years ago, I was in Cappadocia, the troglodyte world of tuff and caves so important to the early formation of the Christian tradition. Cave churches, cave monasteries, cave cities. Toward the end of my visit I found the ancient church of my old friend Saint Gregory Nazianzus (329/30 – 390/91), the great poet of the Church, an aristocrat who cultivated roses contrary to the monastic manual's requirement to only grow turnips; Gregory who gave his best thinking to nurture our understanding of the Trinity. His church is located on a narrow flat piece of land, a few acres at best, surrounded by caves carved out of the mountains that come up to its edge. I walked around to the front of the enclosed compound to the main entrance in the wall. There, a few meters from the stair leading to the door was an elderly woman, head covered, hoeing her garden of turnips surrounded by roses. I opened the large beautiful hand carved door. The stone pathway to the church beckoned. On both sides of the pathway blooming roses, descendants I thought, of those planted in the fourth century by my old friend.

The church became a mosque following the tragic population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923. The Imam greeted me with warmth and grace. He knew a little about the saint who had built the church and wanted to know more. Just before entering the church I noticed a small octagon building, perhaps five and half feet high off to the right, a baptistery I thought. "Azim" was written on the wall. After our time in the church (the mosque) we lingered in the courtyard talking about the gift of faith. I asked him about the little building and he said it was the place of water and would I like to see it. He unlocked the door and opened it. "Be careful", he said, "the steps are worn and steep and you will have to bend your head." And steep they were, a sharp descent down forty-seven steps in all, down into the midst of the earth. At the bottom it opened into a domed pool perhaps five feet across. Two niches were carved in the wall, one for candles and the other, I expect, for the icon of the baptism of our Lord. The round pool had a ledge a foot and half wide and water from deep within the earth continued to lap the edge. I knelt and took the water in my hand pouring it over my head and slowly in a reserved way found myself chanted quietly the *tropar* for baptism

As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia!
As many as have been baptized into Christ's death have put on Christ. Alleluia!

An echo down through the centuries. Women, men, children, babes in arms, a great cloud of witnesses. All who had descended. All our descendants. All from the midst of the earth. All baptized into our Lord's death, and thus, able to stand in liberty, not captured by the fray of the world. Here I stood in remembrance with them.

After a time I turned toward the thin beam of light that barely reached down to the pool in the midst of the earth. Slowly, remembering all those who had worn the steps, I ascended up out of the tomb. Like them I came into the brightness of a new day, out of the womb of our second birth. The resurrection of Our Lord opens for us when we are baptized into His death. The Incarnation of Our Lord is given us, when, the tomb becomes a womb. He is our teacher and model. In Him is all reconciled, even our finitude, our dying. Descended into the water in the midst of the earth and ascended into the light of a new day, a world seen as if for the first time. Baptism: descent and death, ascent and birth into a world made new in Christ, the incarnation, the second Adam, who frees us through his death to be mortal, to be who we were created to be.

The light of the world was blinding as I stepped into the church garden and I stumbled on the hose from the Azim watering the roses of Sharon. The Imam embraced me kissing both cheeks and said, "Papa, Papa." He heard my chanting and assumed I was a priest. "Why don't you bring someone and go with them down to the pool and use this holy place for what it was intended?"

Over the past few years each of you have been honed by the two great gifts of Christian formation: study which sharpens the mind through opening what has been handed down to us by tradition and deepens our understanding of the life of the world; and, askesis as the ancients called it, the disciplines of prayer and fasting that free us from the common habits of mind and heart, from our nostalgia and our utopian dreaming, from presumption and projection, from ambition and despair. May your spiritual disciplines daily free you from a world of your own making to be present along with Saint Gregory Nazianzus "to the wonder of it all."

To each of you who today pass through the gate of initiation that VST opened for you:

May your ways of learning continue to unfold as they have for all the spiritual mothers and fathers from the Apostle Paul and his friend Lydia through our ancestors who descended and ascended from the midst of the earth to a new day in Cappadocia, to your teachers and now to you; may that descent and ascent and all that it means become your common path.

May you know the companionship of all those who have gone before and may they both teach and model a stance of faith free of fear and desire so both your mind and heart is attentive to the life of God's beloved world

May each of you in the way knit in you in your mother's womb continue on the pathway to becoming theologians. As another of our spiritual companions Evagrius Ponticus (346-399) said, "If you are a theologian, you will pray truly, and if you pray truly, you will be a theologian." Or, to put it another way, may you always be free from your own passions so you may care for the soul of others and know them in love and mercy.

And finally, may you continue to love the word about the Word of God and know evermore deeply Him who reconciles us "to our deepest distress", who turns enmity to empathy, so we can walk the world with the confidence befitting of our being in the image of God and with the freedom befitting of one for who a vocation to give birth to God's love "in the midst of the earth" is commonplace.

The Imam at the baptistery in Cappadocia invited me to return with someone and use the baptistery as it was meant to be used. May you, each of you, come to all creation, enter into the life of the world as God gives it to us, the place of healing, restoration; the place of communion with the anointed one unto ages of ages.

Bless you