

Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage 2020  
Opening Mass

[*Sirach* 44: 1, 8, 10-15; *Psalms* 132; *Matthew* 13:16-17]

As we all know very well, having a virtual pilgrimage is not the way we would want normally to hold this event. The Lac Ste. Anne pilgrimage is precious to all of us, and a key element in the traditions of the Indigenous peoples. So even though it was necessary to cancel the physical gathering of the people, nevertheless we knew that the pilgrimage must somehow take place. This is why we are marking important moments of this annual event in such a way that people can participate virtually, including this opening mass and the blessing of the lake that will follow. Thank God the technology exists to enable this; in order to take part, it is very important that we see and hear what is happening.

Now, to grasp the message of the sacred texts from the Bible that have just been proclaimed, I'd like us to consider the way by which we are seeing and hearing these pilgrimage events. A handful of people who are present at the site to help make this mass possible will see and hear from up close. Everyone else will do so from a distance. This difference between up close and distant takes us to the heart of what Jesus is teaching in the Gospel.

What we hear him say to the disciples is this: "blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear." He has been speaking to crowds of people, all of whom see and hear him from up close. But not everyone gets what he says; they see but don't perceive and hear but don't understand. The reason is that, in their hearts, they are closed to him and his message. To put it another way, even though they are physically near to Jesus, up close to him, their hearts are very distant. The disciples are those whose hearts are up close, receptive to his love; for this reason, they truly perceive what they are seeing, and really understand what they hear. This is why their eyes and ears are pronounced blessed by the Lord.

We would all love to be physically present for this pilgrimage. That is only right, of course, because as a Christian people it is in our nature to gather together and be with one another in a shared celebration of our faith. Please God we shall be back together again next year. As we hear the Gospel, though, we are reminded that it is not enough to be physically "up close", even when we can gather. What is essential, whether we are present here or not, is that our hearts not be distant from the Lord but very close, united to him and his love. Only in this way do we achieve understanding of His Word and therefore of life's deepest meaning and purpose; only in this way do we perceive the truth of God's love for us and therefore of the wonderful dignity that God's love bestows upon each and every human being.

So, these words of Our Lord are a call to each of us to examine our hearts. Do we seek each day to have our hearts draw ever more near to him, or do we remain distant? That is actually a very challenging question, because the more our hearts get "up close" to our Lord, the more we see and perceive the need to change our lives. The closer we get to Jesus in our hearts, the more we hear and understand his call to conversion. Where does this leave us? Are we like the crowds that closed their hearts to what they heard? If we are struggling with our Christian call, then perhaps it is time to turn to the wisdom of our ancestors and learn from them.

Through my interactions with Indigenous peoples, I have learned that ancestors play a vitally important role in their lives. It is precisely the accumulated teachings of the ancestors that form Indigenous culture, in which people discover and grow in their identity. At this sacred site of pilgrimage, we remember, too, our ancestors in faith, particularly good Ste Anne. With the prophet Sirach, we thank God for their legacy. Their teachings, too, inform our culture. They teach us by their example not to be afraid of the Lord, not to fear his Word that calls us to conversion, not to be timid when we hear him call us to get “up close” in our hearts. From our ancestors in the faith, not only good Ste Anne, but also our precious elders and our grandparents who handed on the faith to us, we learn not to be distant from Jesus but to have him and his Word live within our hearts.

After mass I shall bless the lake. These waters have long been honoured by the Indigenous peoples as a place of healing, where we entrust our lives to the intercession of good Ste Anne, asking her to pray that God’s healing grace touch and transform our lives. We know that many physical cures have, in fact, taken place here. This perhaps deepens our disappointment that, this year, we cannot be physically present at the lake. Let’s remember, though, that the healing the Lord wants to give each of us is that of the heart, which has grown distant from him. We all need ever deeper conversion, we all need our hearts to get “up close”, which is what the Lord wants for us above all other needs. Only Jesus can draw our hearts to him, so let’s lift up this need for healing to Ste Anne. Her intercession can bring the Lord’s healing to our hearts, wherever we are physically, up close or distant, so that we, too, will see and perceive, hear and understand, and thus be pronounced blessed by the Lord.

Good Ste Anne, pray for us!

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith  
Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage Site

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