

## The Gardiner Expressway and our Lord's (Home)coming

### Acts 1:1-11

---

Under the corporate canopy, the ground is not so soft and the sun rarely filters down.<sup>1</sup> Buildings tower overhead—the Scotia Building, the Bank of Montreal, the CN Tower. On the streets below, 30,000 people sleep on wooden park benches or in hostels; they sit on concrete sidewalks and huddle against century-old, brick buildings.

A number of weeks ago, several members of our youth group walked Toronto's downtown streets handing out care packages, nothing complicated—a sandwich, a drink, socks. We started at Nathan Philips Square and headed down Bay Street. As we walked, we heard several stories—sad stories, profoundly honest stories.

But things didn't seem real. With buildings towering overhead and Bay Street executives peeling off hundred dollar bills, the homeless seemed somehow out of place.<sup>2</sup> It wasn't until we ventured into the world of the Gardiner Expressway that words began to fail us. It's there that we heard the city groan (as in the pains of childbirth).<sup>3</sup>

As we walked beside the first onramp, I peered underneath. I was anxious, anxious about what I might see, what I might find beneath the steel girders. I saw two feet. His hands were swollen; his clothes torn and filthy; he was my age. I asked him if he wanted a bite to eat and, a moment later, what life was like for him living under the Gardiner Expressway. His response was one that continues to capture my attention; he responded with a question, "What's life like out there?"

It wasn't long after that that we came across a splattering of graffiti on one particular onramp. Some of it was the standard fair—names, signatures, inappropriate language. Someone had written the warning, "Don't touch my stuff." One word, however, among all the others is now permanently etched into my memory. It was a single word spray painted in bright yellow—*home*.

Today, we are celebrating Ascension Day, the day that Christ was lifted up from this earth into heaven.<sup>4</sup> We are celebrating the day that Jesus returned home, the day he ventured up an onramp to be with his Father. It's a day of celebration because Christ went home not to escape our Gardiner Expressway reality, but to begin the work of making it new again.

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared before his disciples on numerous occasions. For forty days, he spent time with them, wandering in their midst, speaking of the day to come when all things would be made new, when the kingdom would come. On the fortieth day, Jesus was taken from them; he was taken up before their very eyes; he returned to *his* promised land.

The disciples looked intently as Jesus was taken from them and, as they looked up, two people appeared before them and told them that Jesus had returned to his Father. These words wouldn't have been unfamiliar to the disciples. It hadn't been that long ago that Jesus had told them that he would be going away. He had told them, as it's recorded in the gospel of John, that he was going to be with his Father; he was going to go home.<sup>5</sup>

When I left for university that first September, home was the last place I wanted to be. I

---

<sup>1</sup> Ani Difranco, "Not so Soft," *Not So Soft*, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> U2, "Bullet the Blue Sky," *The Joshua Tree*, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, and Romans 8:22.

<sup>4</sup> *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 18, Q & A 46.

<sup>5</sup> John 14:28.

was anxious to get out, to see the world, to go to school and, yes, to get into some trouble. By the time the end of the first semester had rolled around, there was no place I wanted to go more. I wanted to go home, to be fed by my parents and not the dining hall staff. I was tired of tater tots and french fries, exhausted because I had been going to bed at 4:00am, and I so much wanted to go to sleep to something besides the loud music that was coming from down the hall.

Almost all of us long to go home after a period of being away, of being on vacation. There's something about returning home, about sleeping in our own bed; there's something about a homecoming that has an air of celebration.

At an earlier point in his ministry, Jesus told a story about a certain son who returned home.<sup>6</sup> The parable of the lost son is a story about two brothers, one of whom asks for his portion of the inheritance, so that he can squander it away in worldly living. The other brother remains at home to work the fields. He's the responsible one—the one who works out of a sense of duty and obligation. When the first son returns home empty handed, the father welcomes him with open arms. By the father's grace, a party is held, a fattened calf is slaughtered and the family celebrates. The other brother, however, is angry and frustrated, and he remains outside, working the fields, refusing to celebrate his brother's return.

This parable can be read in a number of different ways, but it's, first and foremost, a parable about God's grace—a grace that is sufficient even for those children who waste their gifts away.<sup>7</sup> This parable is not an Ascension Day story; Jesus is not the lost son who lived a life of excess and sin.

That said, there are some echoes of this story in our Ascension Day text, and they're fascinating ones. Jesus did “squander” his inheritance, his divinity. He took on our likeness, belittling himself, living among us in weakness and in poverty, incarnated. He suffered and longed to fill his stomach with the scraps of his Father's table, even and especially on the cross.

On the day of his ascension, Jesus returned to the Father and the Father welcomed him with arms wide open.<sup>8</sup> Ascension Day is a day of celebration, a day in which the Father throws a banquet . . . a day in which the disciples remain outside. Like the brother, we, too, remain outside working the fields, while the Father celebrates his Son's return.

I can't even begin to imagine what was going through the minds of the disciples as they saw their Lord taken from them. Jesus had been with them for forty days, speaking about the kingdom of God. And then, he up and left, quite literally. They had just finished asking him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom?” The disciples expected to see the kingdom come; they wanted to see his will be done. Instead, Jesus returned home, leaving them to work the fields outside.

But the disciples' response was not one of frustration or anger. According to Luke, the disciples worshipped their ascended Lord; they were filled with joy.<sup>9</sup>

As our youth group walked underneath the Gardiner Expressway, I was overcome by feelings of sadness, frustration and anger—anger directed at myself, but also toward Jesus. The kingdom of God was promised some 2000 years ago, but we're still wandering in our own desert wasteland, left to work the fields outside. Like the Israelites who wandered in the desert for forty years, we've seen the Jordan River. We've caught glimpses of the promised land; and yet, we're still wandering around, confused by governments gripped by scandals and media that's more

---

<sup>6</sup> Luke 15:11-32.

<sup>7</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Creed, “With Arms Wide Open,” *Human Clay*, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 24:52.

concerned with selling stories than sharing them. We're wandering in a land that's traded humility for power and homes for homepages. And while we wander and wait to enter our promised land, the Father and Son are having a party.

As we handed out care packages, it struck me that justice might not be for any of us, at least not here.<sup>10</sup> At one point, a young woman approached us, hobbling and nervous, with hands outstretched. She introduced herself by saying that she had pneumonia and that we shouldn't get too close. She carried the weight of the world in those hands.<sup>11</sup>

Our walk came to an end near Spadina Avenue. On the exit ramp was a notice—a single sheet of yellow paper. It was an eviction notice. All residents were to gather up their belongings and vacate the public right of way. The homeless, who had come to call the girders of the Gardiner Expressway home, were being evicted.

This is the world we all live in; we are like wanderers in our own Gardiner Expressway reality. *Just* is not a word I'd use to describe our world. I'm now constantly reminded of the question, "What's life like out there?" Even for us, who live out here, there's a great deal of suffering, from motorcycle accidents to children who have left the church, from heart attacks and mild strokes to abuse and neglect, from postpartum depression to suffocated babies. This is what we call *home*. To some extent, we all live underneath the girders of the Gardiner Expressway, crying out for justice and mercy.

But like the Israelites as they wandered the desert after leaving Egypt, we are not without provision. God does provide for us. Ascension Day isn't about being abandoned by Jesus or about working the fields alone; it's about a promise—that's why the disciples were filled with joy. Just as the Lord provided a pillar of fire (and manna and quail) for the Israelites, Jesus promised his disciples that he would send his Spirit to be with us.<sup>12</sup> He promised not to send a single pillar of fire, but tongues of fire that would come to rest on all those who would receive his Spirit.

Just before our Lord ascended into heaven, he said, "The kingdom will come, but it's not for you to know the time or the date. In the time between, you will receive the power of my Spirit, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, including St. Catharines." Jesus promised that the kingdom would come in all its fullness. He renewed the covenant that God had made with his people so often before: All things will be made new, in and through the Spirit.

Jesus returns home to prepare the way for us, to speak of the injustice of this world in the presence of our Father and to remind us that, as coheirs, we, too, will experience the newness, the freshness, the beauty of a recreated heaven and earth.<sup>13</sup> Our Lord will return and our Gardiner Expressway home will be forever changed.

In the meantime, Jesus has sent his Spirit so that we might experience his presence, his grace, his majesty, already now, underneath the Gardiner Expressway. The Holy Spirit has been given to us to comfort us, to be with us, to walk with us, so that we might share in all of Christ's blessings.<sup>14</sup> In the Spirit, there's an open invitation: Come, cry me a river; come, laugh out loud.<sup>15</sup> The Spirit is constantly patching our crumbling, concrete dreams and graffiti-plastered girders.

---

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Vandezande, *Justice: Not Just Us*, (Toronto: Public Justice Resource Centre, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Indigo Girls, "The Girl with the Weight of the World in her Hands," *Nomads, Indians, Saints*, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 13: 21-22.

<sup>13</sup> *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 18, Q & A 49.

<sup>14</sup> *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 20, Q & A 53.

<sup>15</sup> Jason Harrod and Brian Funck, "Your Voice at Tidewater," *Harrod and Funck*, 1997.

Many would say that, because we live under the Gardiner Expressway, we're homeless. We aren't homeless; our home is simply not yet what it will be. We're not going to be evicted from our home; it's going to be made new. It's because of the work of the Spirit that we can spray paint a single word—*home*—on our Gardiner Expressway reality. This is our home—a place that is already now being recreated. Praise be to God.

Like the brother in the story of the lost son, we do continue to work the fields outside, but we are not alone. The Spirit is with us as we toil, and we work not in frustration or out of obligation, but with joy, living our lives in gratitude because of the promise Jesus has made: All things will be made new.

Through the power of his Spirit, we are called to be witnesses (μάρτυρες) to that promise.<sup>16</sup> Quite literally, we are called to stand in his place, to speak for him—that's what it means to be a witness.<sup>17</sup> We are called to stand in his place, to speak of the kingdom, of grace, of love to the ends of the earth, in our work, in our play, in how we live our lives; we are called to begin the work of recreation.

Under the canopy of sin, the ground is not so soft and the sun rarely filters down, but there is hope and there is work to be done. As part of our youth group walked downtown handing out care packages, the others were sorting perishable food at a place called, "Second Harvest." 15, 000 meals were packaged and shipped off to 156 different supporting agencies for those less fortunate than you or me. Frozen juice was sorted through; bags of corn were thrown into boxes; fresh produce was shipped with frozen pizzas. On that particular Saturday, in the middle of April, I saw 19 youth, and a few leaders, stand in for Christ.

One phrase kept going through my mind that weekend: Never stop looking. I had driven on those entrance ramps hundreds of times. I had walked through those downtown streets with agenda-driven blinders on. I hadn't even noticed the woman, together with her husband, tucked into the corner. One phrase: Never stop looking. Never stop looking for those in need, homeless or not. Never stop standing in for Christ. Never stop looking for ways to recreate our Gardiner Expressway reality.

Together with us, through his Spirit, Jesus has promised to make all things new. We are his partners working the fields outside, not as frustrated brothers or sisters, but as empowered partners, celebrating with our Lord who has returned home and who is coming again.<sup>18</sup> Never stop looking. And together we say, "Amen."

---

<sup>16</sup> Act 1:8.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony*, Preamble, v. 6.