Good morning, Christ Church, may the peace and grace of God be with you. I am honoured to be here. Allow me to briefly introduce myself. My name is Stephen London, and I am the new bishop of Edmonton. Next Friday (March 18) will mark six months of a very steep learning curve. But to be a bishop is a real honour and gift, and I am very pleased to worship with you today.

For my sermon this morning, I want to preach on the first verse from the Gospel. We are given a situation where Jesus is preaching about how to enter the Kingdom of God and some members of a Jewish party called the Pharisees rush up to tell Jesus he needs to get out of there fast for his own safety. The verse reads, ‘at that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, “get away from here, for King Herod wants to kill you.”’ That is the line I want to preach on: King Herod wants to kill you. But before I dig in, let me say just a brief word about the season in which we are reading this passage to give it some context. As you know, we are in the season of Lent. I won’t give you more of the basics, rather a reminder of some of the deeper meaning of Lent.

Lent is about doing the spiritual work necessary to be able to see clearly. What Jesus meant when he said about people having eyes to see. Seeing of course is a metaphor. It is really about understanding, deep understanding like understanding a situation clearly. Imagine walking into a room where two people are having a huge blow up. You go in and listen, and it is a lot of he did this, and he did that. It is hard to understand the situation clearly. You have to spend some time sorting out hurt feelings and exaggerations and tempers until you get to the nugget. What really happened. Seeing clearly takes time and work. The implication of Lent is that in fact we don’t see clearly, we don’t see God’s work and the world or even ourselves clearly. Inside our hearts and our minds, we have a whole world of stuff that keeps us from seeing clearly, some of it is bad, some of it is good, just in the wrong place. A whole set of stresses, frustrations, old grievances, hopes, ambitions, hurt feelings and so on. And the spiritual teaching of Lent is that all this stuff is not going to magically go away or resolve itself. Metaphorically, you are going to have to go into the desert, spend time in prayer and honest painful reflection and with God’s help and healing, deal with it. Why? So that we come back clearer in mind, heart, body and soul. Because only then will we have the inner capacity to be people of reconciliation. And that is the point. Only when we see clearly what God is doing and what is getting in the way, can we more fully walk in the way of Jesus.

The danger of not walking the Lenten path is that we don’t see clearly, and if we don’t see clearly, we can actually hijack the whole point of the Christian faith wile ironically think that we are doing the right thing. King Herod wants to kill you, is both literal and metaphorical. Let me give you a concrete example of what I mean from just a few days ago. It comes from the awful situation unfolding right now in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin has illegally and unprovoked invaded the sovereign country of Ukraine. The devastation is awful; and not only are there military deaths which are bad enough, but the civilian deaths are mounting, and the devastation of town, villages and cities is becoming worse. The question is what is the Christian response? What is the church in Russia doing to speak against this and call Putin back to repentance? The answer came out on March 6th. In the Orthodox calendar, this is called Forgiveness Sunday. It is the Sunday in which you ask everyone you know in your life to please forgive you for any offense you may have committed to them over the last year, big or small. It is a wonderful tradition for resetting relationships before entering the season of Lent. The Patriarch of Moscow used the opportunity to justify the invasion of Ukraine and the killing of civilians as a rejection of liberal Western values epitomised by the symbol of having to have gay pride parades. As a colleague of mine reflected. This is seriously someone who has lost the Jesus plot. Now that seems like an obvious example of having lost sight of what the church is supposed to be about. But I am sure you have heard the old phrase, when you point a finger at someone else, you point four more back at yourself.

This theme of spiritual blindness, not getting the Jesus plot but hijacking has been a common theme in the Western church for the last two centuries. You may have heard of the theologian Karl Barth. In 1918 he published a biblical commentary called the Letter to the Romans. Not a scintillating title; you might not be tempted to rush out and buy it. But in actual fact, in 1918, it was a page-turner. In fact, it was a bombshell saying ‘NO’ to the whole Christian enterprise in Germany at the time. It started in 1914, when he was an unknown Pastor in Switzerland when Germany declared war, what was the beginning of WWI. What upset Barth was not the war, but the fact that a letter went out from the great German intellectuals of the day all defending this war. The letter was called “The Manifesto of the 93 German Intellectuals to the Civilized World.” What horrified him was that all his beloved teachers and mentors had signed it. They truly believed Germany was in the right. But behind the letter was the belief that God was on their side. How could they believe that? Well, the assumption was that God was obviously behind all the great progress of the previous century. It was a time of great scientific discovery, industry was rising, education was becoming more universal, advancement was happening, and in which country was all this happening the fastest? Germany. And which country was the most advanced? Germany. This was obviously a sign of God’s great providence. Karl Barth said ‘no, you have lost the whole Jesus plot. King Herod is trying to kill you.’

This is a common story of mistaking the good of the nation as what *God* really wants. We have our own stories here in Canada. This is the point of our repenting after the sin of residential schools.

Herod is trying to kill you. I have used that in a metaphorical way, but in the reading it is literal. But it is for all the exact same reasons of the other stories I have told. In Old Testament, there was meant to be a working relationship between the king and the high priest to create a society that was just and would give glory to God. This was always an ideal. Of course, it never worked out well except for a short time under a couple of kings. But by the time of this King Herod, Herod Antipas the son of King Herod the Great by the way, by the time of this King, they had lost the plot. This king was only king because his father had been a supporter of the Roman occupation and the high priest was a very political position. In fact, Jesus uses the metaphor of a mother chicken to describe his own ministry. He has to protect Jerusalem from the fox. He is going to hide them under his wings even if it kills him. We get a glimpse into part of the meaning of Jesus’ death. And this is the point. To walk in the way of King Herod and the Herods of the world is to kill what Jesus is trying to do: the creation of a new heavens and a new earth, a new community where there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, but all are one in Christ. It is a community of reconciliation between peoples. And ultimately, that is how we keep from being spiritually blind. **We have to relentlessly commit to seeing and loving every person as Jesus does. This is the only way.** And if you were to ask me, ‘what is the biggest change in today’s Anglican church?’ It is not about the type of music or the language we use or these other surface changes. It is that we are learning from our past and **relentlessly committing to seeing and loving every person as Jesus does.**

I want to leave you with one last story of what that might look like in your everyday life. Next Friday (March 18 2022) will also be the anniversary of this story. It goes back to 1958 in Louisville Kentucky. A young Catholic priest (Thomas Merton) was running errands in the big city. He would, of course, go on to become one of the most famous Christian writers of the 20th century, but at this time he was still working through his contradictions. He had been taught that the world was only an evil place marked by temptation and deception. The point of the church was to be a fortress, a place to protect Christians. So, on the 18th of March 1958, he was on guard. And then something happened to him. He describes it in these words: ‘In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness… This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud… I have the immense joy of being a person, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.’

This is the point of our Lenten observance. To develop eyes to see like this, to understand the Jesus plot. To be channels of God’s grace, mercy and love. Amen