Thus says the Lord: Here is your God...he comes to save you.

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Pembina 200th Anniversary
Assumption Church, Pembina

Thus says the Lord: Here is your God...he comes to save you. Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe.” Brothers and sisters, this is a remarkable day for all of us, a day for the history books not only for Assumption parish and our Diocese of Fargo, but also for the entire region. I want to thank my brother bishops for joining us for this occasion: Archbishop Hebda of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Archbishop LeGatt of St. Boniface in Manitoba, Bishop Hoeppner of Crookston, Bishop Kagan of Bismarck, and Bishop Sirba of Duluth. You honor us with your presence, and help us to recognize the importance of this joyful event. I also thank my brother priests and deacons, and all the faithful who have come to Pembina to celebrate with us, including our friends from Canada, our spiritual cousins. And I must of course thank Fr. Okogba and the people of Assumption parish for welcoming us to celebrate with you. It is your celebration first and foremost, and it is a joy to be here in this holy place.

As the prophet Isaiah says: “Here is your God, he comes to save you.” Many of you know the history of this parish, but it is worth sharing a few details. Two hundred years ago, in September of 1818, Fr. Dumoulin was sent from St. Boniface in Canada to serve the people of this village of Pembina, which was already a busy trading post. He baptized, he heard confessions, he celebrated Masses, and he blessed many marriages. With a priest in their midst, the people of the parish built a first log church, about a mile north of here, and it was named for St. Francis Xavier, one of the greatest missionaries in the history of the Church. Over the course of time, the parish grew, new missionary pastors came and went, and the faith was handed on. Of course, there were trials as well. The church was flooded more than once, the trading company pulled out of Pembina and the church fell into decay, and if we think we have problems, just remember that in 1863 the church was destroyed by cannon fire! The famous Fr. George Belcourt came as pastor in 1848, and worked with his legendary vigor to serve the faithful. The parish was renamed for the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and from here another parish was established to the west near Walhalla. And of course, the church we celebrate in today was built in 1960, after another flood had ravaged the town.

There is much more to this history, and every family had their own stories to tell of the faith and tenacity of those earliest members of this parish. But behind every story and every chapter is the person of Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus traveled throughout Galilee and the pagan districts of Tyre and Sidon, preaching and healing, so too he came to this spot on the Red River of the North to bring the grace, mercy, and healing of God to his beloved children. Through the ministry of priests like Fr. Dumoulin and Fr. Belcourt, and through the living faith of the people who settled here or moved on from here, our Lord came and established a little piece of his Kingdom on earth, right here at a bend in this river. As the prophet Isaiah says, “Fear not, here is your God...he comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing. Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe.” Into the darkness came the light, who is Jesus himself. Into this wilderness came the Savior, who first sent his apostles out into the world and commanded them to preach the Gospel, and make disciples of all nations. That mission continued right here in Pembina, and it carries on even to this day 200 years later.

Just think of the number of children, men, and women, who have been baptized here. Think of the number of Masses that have been celebrated here. It is said that the name Pembina has a double meaning, one of which is a French word used by the Metis settlers which means “holy bread.” That holy bread is the Eucharist, which is Jesus himself, nourishing our souls and strengthening us for our journeys. Think how many people have come to receive the mercy and forgiveness of God through Reconciliation, the
number who have been confirmed in the Holy Spirit. How many have been blessed through marriage, and how many have we prayed for as they complete their earthly journey and go the house of the Father. Consider how many times the Word of God has been proclaimed in homilies and taught to the young people of this parish, handed on from one generation to another. And how many people have been assisted by the charity of the faithful here at Assumption.

Every parish is a place where Christ has come to his people, where he dwells with them and blesses them with his grace. Just as those earliest settlers and priests put their faith in our Lord, so must we today. Just as they faced one calamity after another, so do we today. But Christ remains with his Church no matter what. It is his Body, we are his members, his people, his family, and he touches us with the grace of the Father through every joy and every sorrow. I can’t begin to imagine the courage it took for those earliest pastors and faithful to start a home and a parish in this place. Could they have done it all on their own? Probably not, but they were never really alone. Our Lord had come to them, he had made his dwelling with them, and he promises to remain with us always if we will make a place for him in our hearts.

Two hundred years is a great history, but I’m sure we all know that the work isn’t done. The mission that began here two centuries ago must continue and grow. Pope Francis has called each of us to be missionary disciples, followers of Jesus who are ready to be sent, ready to share with others the beauty and joy of our faith, ready to live it and give witness to it wherever we are. We have neighbors who wait for us to show them something of our faith in Jesus. There are others who are alone or suffering who need our compassion and love. Our children need to know the Gospel just as we did, and we must teach them by our words and our example. Fr. Dumoulin and those early settlers lived in a wilderness, and so do we, but it’s a spiritual wilderness, where God has been forgotten or maybe just set aside by many. Our Lord is still here, still dwelling among his people, and he sends us out as his new apostles, his new missionaries. He asks us to live the faith and pass it along to a new generation.

As we celebrate this 200th anniversary here at Assumption, the “oldest Catholic mission” in our region, we give thanks to God for coming to us here on the northern plains, and we pray for his blessing as we begin the next chapter of this great story. May our Blessed Mother Mary, assumed into heaven, pray for us and guide us always to her Son, Jesus.