

Sunday 21st May 2017 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		6th Sunday of Easter 5th Sunday after Easter Year A
Acts 17:22-31	Ps 66:7-19	1 Peter 3:13-22
		John 14:15-21
OUR FAITH IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE		

“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” (Jn 14:21)

TRAGEDY AND MEANING

We want to know that our lives have meaning, purpose; that what is happening to us is part of a bigger plan or picture; that what we are going through will be ultimately for our good; that however tough things may be now, they will work out for the best. We say things like “there is light at the end of the tunnel”; “every cloud has a silver lining”; “God has a purpose for my life”; “alles sal regkom”. We want to know that we are held in love; that our struggles and heartaches have purpose and meaning beyond what we are able to see now.

Chelsea Moses is a grade 9 Nombulelo schoolgirl. She wrote about the recent suicide of a fellow pupil: “If we all look deep inside ourselves, if we go to that place where we try to hide from other people,... we can see the bright future ahead of us. You could see the little rose waiting for autumn so that it can blossom, just like we are destined to blossom...”¹

It is not always easy or clear or straightforward. There is deep outrage and widespread anger and despair in SA at the current high rate of abuse and violence against women and children, e.g. the recent brutal murder of Karabo Mokoena, in Johannesburg – who had an argument

¹ “Chelsea Moses “Choose life!!! Suicide: Is not the option”. *Grocott’s Mail* 19th May 2017

with her boyfriend, and was necklaced and her body doused in acid...the rape and murder of 3-year old Courtney Pieters, in Elsie's River (buried yesterday); the very real fears by some of our Rhodes students as they prepare to travel home for the June vac, of human trafficking: being picked up, drugged, kidnapped, abducted.

It is very hard to see God's purpose in something as dreadful as these things – and let's not make the mistake that somehow "this was God's will". No such thing! The terrible events that happen, the dreadful things that we do to one another, are not God's will. They are the result of human sin, humankind's rebellion against God. The God-given medicine, the anti-biotic, the remedy, is repentance and redemption – repentance is what we need to do; redemption – being set free, being bought back from slavery – is what God has done for us in his son Jesus Christ.

The Gospel message, the good news, is that God does hold us in love, that we are part of a bigger picture; that God knows even the number of hairs on our head, that you and I are of infinite worth and value to God; that failure and disaster is not the end of our story or the end of our dreams. We are invited, drawn into a relationship of love with God.

The gospel response to these dreadful events, our response as the church, as Christians, is to point to God and God's will for us as men, as women, to ask how we care for those close to us, how we as communities protect those who are vulnerable.

PAUL'S SERMON & THE "ACTS OF GOD"

During these Sundays of Easter, we have been reading sections of the Book of Acts – the Acts of the Apostles.

The book of Acts has a number of different themes:

The conversion and ministry of Paul;

The work of the Holy Spirit;
The beginnings of the early church;
The ongoing presence and ministry of Jesus Christ – the Risen Christ at work through his followers and disciples;
A call to repentance, conversion and faith in Christ at the heart of apostolic preaching.

The **central theme** is the “Acts of God” – the role which God plays in the story. We are shown the purposes of God being worked out through the various people and groups. The author of the book of Acts “unveils the workings of the divine in ordinary human events.” We are given examples of God’s action and presence in everyday life, changing hearts, transforming communities.

God is central in the biblical story. We are invited to understand history as the unfolding plan or design of God. God is at work in the events of human history.

“As I have designed, so shall it be; and as I have planned, so shall it come to pass” (Isaiah 14:24)

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:10-11)

This brings together the two strands of Christian faith and witness:

God and my salvation, my relationship with God, God’s purposes and will for me, God’s love for me... Am I in a right relationship with God? Have I responded to God’s love for me in Christ? Have I given my heart to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour? The call to repentance and conversion. Questions that we must ask and answer.

And...

Our public witness, our presence and action as Christians, the church, the body of Christ, on the national stage.

Paul's speech was given in the Areopagus in Athens – the public square, the centre of the city's commercial and intellectual and religious life, the place of open air debate, scholarly learning and teaching, great religiosity, and the dispensing of justice. It was perhaps a mixture of Rhodes University, Church Square, the High Court. It was the place where the learned and educated of society, the religious and civic leaders, gathered to discuss and debate the great matters of the time.

That was the context for Paul's address.

He tackles them on religious grounds. He comments on the many idols and altars and temples, the objects and places of worship; he refers to the altar "to an unknown god" and then "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." – and he draws on the faith of Israel and the Christian revelation to point them to God the creator, God the redeemer who sent his Son, the work and person of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. He calls them to faith in Christ.

THE SACC REPORT

SA, we are told, is 80% Christian. We are a nation largely Christian in our outlook, in faith, in worship – as much as we acknowledge the many other faiths and belief systems that are present among us. Yet there are times when it would seem that we are worshipping an unknown god; that the faith so many people profess or claim, bears no resemblance to the Christian gospel; people go to church, pray, profess belief, yet their actions are in sharp contradiction to the gospel, to the values of the Gospel.

There is a serious breakdown between people's private faith and belief, and their public actions on the street.

There is very deep national pain:

- the pains of rampant drug abuse, gangster terror, wanton rape and domestic violence;
- the pains of abandoned families, children without care, and the maltreatment of the helpless such as the 100+ Esidimeni victims;
- the pains of fearsome crime that renders society unsafe at home and in public places;
- the pains of rampant corruption in business deals, especially with the government; State Capture and the growing impunity of those in power, compounding the challenge of poverty and deprivation.²

It is in this light that the South African Council of Churches (SACC) has issued, on Friday 18th May 2017, its report “Unburdening, Uncapturing” on corruption and decay in SA.

Some background: the SACC, in April 2016, created the Unburdening Panel process, as a pastoral (not a political) response to the State Capture report, to enable those who wished, to tell their stories, not to lawyers, but to pastors.

The revelations have been horrific. What has emerged is that “the problem is far greater than corruption, but organised chaos.... What appears to be chaos and instability in government may well be a systemic design ... a chaotic design...”³

The report identifies “trends of inappropriate control of State systems through a power-elite that .. is systematically siphoning the assets of the State...”

² “Unburdening, Uncapturing” – the SACC report, 18th May 2017

³ “Unburdening, Uncapturing” – the SACC report, 18th May 2017

The report concludes that “the government of the day has lost the moral radar that should inform the public service of ... ‘people first’ ... “the present government has lost moral legitimacy.”⁴

The OT prophet Amos is today addressing our nation:

“How you hate honest judges! How you despise people who tell the truth! You trample the poor, stealing their grain through taxes and unfair rent. Therefore, though you build beautiful stone houses, you will never live in them. Though you plant lush vineyards, you will never drink wine from them. For I know the vast number of your sins and the depth of your rebellions. You oppress good people by taking bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. So those who are smart keep their mouths shut, for it is an evil time.” (Amos 5:10-13)

The voice of the church is speaking in the public square to call people from worship of an unknown god – the god of selfishness and corruption and greed and dishonesty – to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Many Christians from different churches, including our own, are using the 50 Days from Easter until Pentecost to soak our land in prayer, with particular intensity on Ascension this coming Thursday, and on the Day of Pentecost itself – “a collective cry for the Holy Spirit to descend to convict us and heal our land.” Two more prayer phases are being planned for 2017, possibly closing with a major prayer Rally of Healing and Reconciliation on December 16th.

CONCLUSION

We are Easter people. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and his victory over sin and evil and death.

Life and hope, not death and despair...

⁴ “Unburdening, Uncapturing” – the SACC report, 18th May 2017

The cross of Christ with its horror and suffering and desolation was not the last word.... Evil and oppression and deceit and betrayal and failure are our present reality, but things do not end here....

Because we are people of the resurrection....

Because God has the last word...

Because of the empty tomb...

Because of our risen Lord, who is the way, the truth, the life...

“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” (Jn 14:21)

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