

Sunday 30th July 2017 St Peter's, Cradock 9.30 a.m.		17th Sunday – Pentecost 8 - Year A OLIVE SCHREINER KAROO WRITERS FESTIVAL	
Gen 29:1-28	Ps 128	Romans 8:26-39	
		Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52	
Healing and hope and Karoo beetles			

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” (Matt 13:31-32)

INTRODUCTION – THE OLIVE SCHREINER WRITERS FESTIVAL

Greetings to our hosts here this morning at St Peter's: Archdeacon Zweli Tom (in absentia); Revd Samantha Eagles, priest in charge; her husband Wayvern, children Maya and Zeeta; Revd Maria Ellens; churchwardens Mrs Charnell Christians and Mr Edwin Kroutz; parish council and all the parishioners of St Peter's; people from St James Michausdal; the Cradock Methodist community. And some familiar faces from Grahamstown: Larry Collett. Brian Wilmot. The Cradock Antrobi... others... the Grahamstown contingent... the director of NELM, Dr Beverley Thomas.

Thank you for your invitation to Claire and me to be with you this morning, and to Bishop Bethlehem for his permission for us to do so.

Thank you to our wonderful hosts, for your amazing hospitality and for all that you have done to make these few days, this Festival, so special. All the months of preparation, the behind the scenes work, the last minute inevitable rush, sorting out the gremlins... Thank you!

If this Festival is anything like Grahamstown, you are probably longing for us all to leave so that you can have the place to yourselves once again! Peace and quiet at last! Festival visitors, we find, are very welcome – for about 2 days; then they must just spend all their money and go home.

Cradock – the burial place of Olive Schreiner. The birthplace of Guy Butler. The place of struggle, and the final resting place, for the Cradock Four – Matthew Goniwe, Fort Calata, Sparrow Mkhonto, and Sicelo

Mhlauli. Their graves, and that of Olive Schreiner's, sites of pilgrimage. These figures, towering over us all in recent history, represent so much of what we face and continue to grapple with, today – Schreiner and the Cradock Four with their focus on issues of race and class and privilege, justice and reconciliation, Guy Butler and Olive Schreiner brought us poetry and wonder, creativity and beauty; the great expanse of the Karoo.

The struggles and heartache of this community; and us all. Shadows, darkness, sorrow and loss. Anger and despair and outrage. The deep wounds in our hearts, in our country. But also - light and hope, longing and love. Wonder and delight. Vision and faith. Our search for meaning and purpose, for healing and for peace.

1st POINT – THE PATH TO HEALING & HOPE (1)

This year's Writers Festival takes place in the context of turmoil and upheaval and national crisis.

How apt, I suggest, are the opening phrases of *A Tale of Two Cities* and even if like Paul Walters' English I students, we might not have read the rest of the book, most of us know the opening paragraph:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...”

So we gather to find our way forward in these best and worst of times, the path – we hope and long for – the path to healing and hope.

But first, two stories, two personal memories from our move from Cape Town to the Eastern Cape.

The first one is a piece of family legend.

When Claire and I arrived with our two young daughters in Grahamstown, nearly ten years ago, it was with a range of mixed feelings. I was hugely excited. To be dean... to move to the Eastern Cape... to what in many

ways is another country... but the family, though loyally supportive, were less than enthusiastic.

Ash Wednesday was early that year, and so a few weeks into the start of the new school term, as we began Lent, we sat around the table discussing what each of us might give up for Lent that year. Our younger daughter, then in Grade 5, suddenly said, "I know what I am going to give up for Lent." There was a pause... we looked at her with interest. She burst out "Grahamstown!" But in time she came round, and now considers herself very much a product of Grahamstown and the Eastern Cape!

The second – an image that I found so important. Karoo beetles. Found under Karoo bush. Not amongst the great trees of the Southern Cape forests, or the mountains of the Western Cape, but half hidden, secretive, unexpected, yet very beautiful. A gift to be discovered, enjoyed. A small treasure that might otherwise go unnoticed. Small, insignificant, but vital to the life and well-being of the veld. Essential to the ecology – like the Addo dungbeetles. Signs of life in the wilderness.

My sermon title for this morning: healing and hope and Karoo beetles.

2nd POINT – PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 parables of the kingdom

Our Gospel reading – a series of parables of the kingdom of God. Matthew's Gospel has a series of five sermons or great blocks of teaching; chapter 13 is the third of these. It contains seven parables. The parables all point to the kingdom of God, that is, God's rule, God's reign, in Israel, the world, our communities, our hearts and lives. The kingdom of God, Jesus says, is like this...

Jesus, we are told, often used parables as a way of teaching. Parables are far more than simply stories. They are "narratives which challenge [us] by their paradoxes and ambiguity, [they] suggest new apprehensions of life... [they] demand reflection and decision.... simple on the surface... [they] are suggestive and undetermined. They often speak of daily life... but they equally often include observations, characters or plots which shock the

audience out of their comfortable assumptions about society, God, and life. They invite new applications to different contexts.”¹

So we read these well known and familiar parables, but however familiar they may be, we can be shocked, shaken (and stirred!), caught off guard. To read the parables is to step out of our comfort zones.

Mustard seed and yeast stress the LARGE EFFECTS FROM A SMALL BEGINNING:

Mustard seeds – tiny - were often used to indicate smallness.

The product of the mustard seed is also unusually large since mustard bushes can grow six to ten feet high.

The image of birds nesting in the mustard bush’s branches like those of a tree is drawn from Daniel 4:10-12, 20-22 – the great tree which Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon sees in a dream and which symbolises his rule over the earth, towering over everything, providing shelter and refuge and shade.

Thus the mustard bush understood as a tree is an apt symbol for God’s kingdom.

Both parables point to the hiddenness and surprise of the kingdom of God since both the seed and the leaven work out of sight to produce great effects. “Like bread rising” – a phrase from the Writers Festival, yesterday.

What are our dreams? What is our vision for the way forward? Is there a mustard seed there, waiting to be planted, to take root, to grow? Let’s never think our voice, our efforts, our contributions, are worthless, unnoticed.

They are the mustard seed, a small beginning for the kingdom of God, the yeast, the transformative power of the kingdom unleashed...the local church – yeast.

¹ Saldarini, AJ, in Dunn and Rogerson (eds.) *Eerdman’s Commentary of the Bible*, 2003, p 1030

The treasure hidden in a field, and the pearl of great price, emphasise the VALUE of the kingdom, and the level of commitment needed to gain it.

Both the farmer who unexpectedly found the treasure in a field and the merchant who was searching for fine pearls used all their resources to acquire the single most valuable and important object of their desire.

The kingdom of God. The treasure that we unexpectedly stumble across. The pearl of great price for which we have been on the lookout, for years... the dream of a transformed, healed community... families living together in peace... a country no longer at war with itself... a life given for others... a life-long commitment to justice... holding wonder and beauty in our hands... creating... a life worth living... the discovery that changes us forever... that sets us on fire...

The dragnet which brings in fish of every kind, both good and bad, describes GOOD AND BAD RESPONSES TO GOD'S RULE (the kingdom of God); there is a sorting out, a judgement of good and evil.

It means that we are living with imperfection... with the good and the bad... our own failings... the failings of others... those who with the best of intentions get it wrong... the terrible blindness or unwillingness to see... we elect leaders and sometimes, tragically, they become monsters... and when things do go wrong, are we punitive or redemptive...?

3rd POINT – THE PATH TO HEALING & HOPE (2)

What is the path to healing and hope? It is to sow mustard seeds of love and hope and justice and faith, those small yet transformative actions, attitudes, initiatives, that by God's grace have all the potential to grow and bring life – the power of the resurrection at work in us and through us. Those mustard seeds of hope. The Karoo beetles of wonder and discovery. Signs of life in the wilderness.

We are living, some of us, with a mixture of despair and outrage, and great optimism and hope. Despair and outrage when we see or read of our national resources being squandered by those in authority; corrupt leadership; state capture; fear; greed; deliberate blindness. I am appalled at the behaviour of the Zuptas, the Bell Pottingers, the KPMGs, those who play, who gamble, with the future of our country – in the name, we are told,

of freedom, of liberation. It is no small matter that the SACC has declared our current regime to have lost moral credibility to rule, and has called for parliament to be dissolved, for fresh elections and a national convention to be held, to find the way forward. Mandela Day, 18th July, was a day of work and service for some, and also a day when a gathering of civil society met in ongoing efforts to revision our leadership and create a social movement for change. August 8th is the day scheduled for the parliamentary vote, hopefully to be a secret ballot, the vote of no confidence in President Zuma. Despair and rage. We are in this time of great national crisis. The drought we are experiencing is a terrible symptom and sign of the state of the nation.

Yet we live also with great optimism and hope. The energy and voice of many. The commitment to build our land. Those who have found the courage to speak up and speak out. Those who do blow the whistle on corruption. The writers, the artists, the dramatists, the historians, the theologians, the poets and musicians, those in the media (but not ANN7). All who help us vision a way forward. A fresh start. All who are the leaven in the dough, to bring change and transformation. The mustard seeds. The Karoo beetles. The small beginnings. The initiatives. All who do what they can, offer what they have, to make a difference – however small – the mustard seed. All our grass-roots community people, not with names that we read about in the press, but the hidden, ordinary people, unnoticed by and large, but who make a difference. Who continue to dream. To hope. To work. To believe. To love. To reach out. To create. To vision. It is the mustard seeds, the bits of leaven, that will transform and bring life. And these mustard seeds, these bits of yeast, are found in every community, every parish, every town, every gathering. This Schreiner Festival. A mustard seed of life and potential and energy. Who knows what will be its fruit?

Why do we do this? Why do we continue to hope, to dream? Because we have found the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price; we have found the way, the path that leads to healing. It is for us the way of Christ, the good news that he brings, of redemption, for life after the locusts have eaten, resurrection after death, love that continues to hold us, no matter what, Jesus who invites us to walk with him, to trust, to keep on going. The Lord takes our broken efforts, our stumbling attempts, and touches them with gold. We become channels, instruments of God's love and grace. And we discover, through the darkness, that nothing can separate us from God's love. Amazing!

CONCLUSION

And so we give thanks: for the Schreiner Festival; for the mustard seeds of hope and life; for the Karoo beetles, for the treasure, the pearl of great price; for the invitation to be part of God's kingdom; for the love of God that holds us – always.

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