

Sunday 10th March 2019 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		1st Sunday in Lent – Year C
Deut 26:1-11	Ps 91:1-2, 9-16	Romans 10:8-13
		Luke 4:1-13
TRUST, TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS		

“Full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan, and for forty days he wandered in the wilderness, led by the Spirit and tempted by the devil. During that time he ate nothing, and at the end of it he was famished” (Luke 4:1-3).

LENT & TESTING

In these opening words of our Gospel, we are given the model for the season of Lent which began this past week on Ash Wednesday. Forty days, with Jesus in the wilderness, fasting, being led by the Spirit, tempted and tested by the devil. For Jesus, this time in the wilderness was a vital in-between time. It follows his baptism and life-changing affirmation, the voice and call by the Father – “You are my beloved Son; in you I delight” (Luke 3:22). He will leave the wilderness after this time of testing to begin his ministry.

OUR SCRIPTURES

Deut 26:1-11 – a picture of a people at peace. God had delivered them from slavery and led them into the promised land. No longer were they a “homeless Aramaean who went down to Egypt” (Deut 26:5) where they were treated harshly and humiliated and made into slaves. Instead, the Lord had led them out of Egypt and brought them to this place, this land of milk and honey” (26:9); and now, in thanksgiving and in trust for what they had received from God, the people were to offer the first fruits of their harvest. It was an act of trust and thanksgiving for God’s bounty and God’s deliverance. God had saved them. They were commanded to look back and see how God had led

them through trials, testing and temptations. Their experience of deliverance was also a reminder and a call to trust.

It is an experience of salvation affirmed in **Psalm 91**. Those “who dwell in the shelter of the Most High ... will say to the Lord ‘You are my refuge and my stronghold: my God in whom I trust.’ God’s response to those who do so dwell and who make the Lord their refuge and stronghold: “When he calls upon me I answer him: I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and bring him to honour” (91:15). Trust in God for our salvation and our help, for all our needs.

Then comes the inner assurance of salvation in the New Testament, through trust in Jesus Christ, now linked to confession and faith in Christ: “...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (**Rom 10:9**). Again, the call and reminder to trust.

Then the Gospel of the temptation of Jesus: **Luke 4:1-13**. Jesus had received the power of God, great gifts for ministry; now came the time of testing to ensure that he would use and not misuse these gifts, this calling. We see in the temptations of Jesus our own struggles, our own temptations, our own times of testing – and we are to take courage from these. “He was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). Every day you and I face trials and temptations; we face the choice between right and wrong; we face tests almost beyond our endurance – but not quite. “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide a way out so that you will be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13). And sometimes, all we can do is to take up the armour of God, and to stand firm (Eph 6:13).

THE CATHEDRAL STATEMENT OF INCLUSIVITY

One of the tests that we as the church – Anglicans together with our sister churches – are facing is the extent to which we are willing to welcome and include people of different sexual orientations into the

life of the church. It is something that the Anglican Communion is divided about, going back to Lambeth 1988, and the splits that have taken place since then, particularly regarding the nature of marriage and the place of same-sex couples in the life of the church. The traditional view is that marriage is between a man and a woman - male and female – based on the teaching of Genesis 1 – 2; and there are other scriptures in Old and New Testament which have been used to exclude homosexuals - gays and lesbians – from the life of the church. And any form of homosexual practice – same-sex relationships – has generally been condemned. This has been a matter of debate and discussion within our own Synods as the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. At this point in time, our canon or law on marriage remains unchanged. We do not marry or bless same-sex unions. And those in same-sex unions may not be ordained.

But it has been and continues to be a matter of debate and disagreement in churches in many parts of the world. The Episcopal Church (USA), the Anglican Church in Canada, the Anglican Church in New Zealand are among Anglican Provinces which do marry those in same-sex unions, and ordain as deacon, priest or bishop those in same-sex partnerships. Preparations for Lambeth 2020 are currently stating that bishops in same-sex partnerships may not bring their same-sex spouse to Lambeth in 2020, in an effort to hold the Communion together by bringing all the bishops to Lambeth and to avoid some boycotting it. As it stands, it is likely that some from both ends of the sexuality debate and spectrum will boycott or refuse to go.

In South Africa, the Civil Union Act of 2006 makes provision for same-sex couples to enter into civil unions or marriages – either term may be used. But thus far churches in SA are not compelled to solemnise such unions, but have been free to decide on this matter.

In 2015, the DRC (NGK) decided that they would allow local congregations the option of blessing same sex unions – ie to recognise same-sex marriages - and of ordaining as dominee or minister those in

same-sex unions. The NGK reversed this decision a year later, in 2016.

This past Friday, 8th March 2019, the Gauteng High Court overturned that 2016 decision by the NGK, and ruled that same-sex members of the NGK are entitled to full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms that the church offers, including marriage and ordination.

This is an important development. It means that the state has interfered into the internal decisions of a church; that the state has taken it upon itself to define what is church doctrine – normally the state has kept clear of this. I am surprised – and disappointed - that members of the NGK or any church should appeal to secular authorities to sort out internal, doctrinal matters.

But we need to ask: In what instances does the state have the right to intervene in church matters? We have thus far ensured that clergy discipline matters are dealt with according to church law, not state law. At the same time, when there have been recent church scandals – the Seven Angels church at Ngcobo, or the Timothy Omotoso sex trial, or when cases of sexual abuse or financial fraud within a church group has come to light – we have no problem with the state intervening where it would appear that the law of the country has been broken.

So if a particular doctrine or practice of the church is seen as discriminatory in terms of the Constitution of our country, and therefore against the law, should it be allowed to continue, under the Bill of Rights clause of freedom of religion? Should churches resist – as some most certainly will - this ruling by the High Court to declare discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, illegal? Or do we hear it as a gentle and timely word that we need to re-look at our own practices and beliefs?

That is why our draft Statement of Inclusivity, which is in the Vestry agenda for next Sunday (and was in the pew leaflet, 20th January

2019), is so important. As the Cathedral, we have been on something of a journey with this one, for a number of years. We have spoken and preached and discussed. At Vestry two years ago, we adopted a broad statement of welcome and inclusivity. The statement that Vestry will look at next Sunday goes further. It affirms all human beings equally created in the image of God; it acknowledges centuries of bias and discrimination against those with sexual orientation and gender identity different from the dominant male/female experience; it welcomes developing understandings of the complexity and diversity of our human sexuality; it affirms and supports those who identify as part of the sexuality spectrum – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer. It notes that the Cathedral is participating in the Archbishop’s Commission on Human Sexuality, and is doing so in the context of the Pastoral Standards of our church, which have the intention of making the church a safe and welcoming space for all.

What does this draft Statement NOT do? It is not saying that we as the Cathedral will now conduct same-sex marriages or bless same-sex unions. Until and unless Provincial Synod allows for this, we do not have the authority to do so. Nor do clergy who are marriage officers have the authority as individuals to conduct same-sex marriages, as we are licensed under the Marriage Act of 1960 and not under the Civil Union Act. So we do not have the legal capacity in this regard.

What does the draft Statement, then, do? It seeks to create a safe space. It invites dialogue. It commits to minister to our gay and lesbian Anglican Christians. It seeks to do all that we can to fully include people of all sexual orientations, into the life of our church.

At the same time, it presents us with a challenge. One of the most dysfunctional areas of our community life – and here I refer to the broader community, and not only the church – is in the area of our relationships. Couples living together outside of marriage. Multiple partners. Single parent families, with many – all too many – absent fathers. Adultery, unfaithfulness, divorce all too common. Very high levels of gender based violence. Rape. Abuse within our homes. We

all need a wake-up call to a new ethic of relationship, a standard of holy living and holy lives in this most important aspect of our lives. It is a great sadness for me that our Christian witness in the area of marriage and faithfulness has been so largely eroded.

CONCLUSION

And so what is indeed a time of testing may turn out to be a time of strengthening, reshaping, rethinking, and recommitment, a time to trust. May God strengthen and guide us in the days ahead.

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