

Sunday 3rd September 2017 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		22nd Sunday – Pentecost 13 - Year A Induction of Head Chorister and Choristers	
Exodus 3:1-15	Ps 105:1-6, 23-26, 45	Romans 12:9-21	
		Matthew 16:21-28	
BURNING BUSHES			

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’... God also said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “YAHWEH [The LORD], the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you....” ’ ” (Ex 3:14-15)

INTRODUCTION

Today is a special day for us as the Cathedral, and particularly our choir, as the Head Chorister for the next 12 months is inducted, and 5 new choristers are robed and admitted. I want to take this opportunity to say a very big and sincere thank you to our choir, to the choir leaders, all responsible for our music ministry here at the Cathedral: Kutlwano (Kepa) with Anelisa; David, the chair of the Choir School; Maggy, the co-ordinator; our organists; Asakhe with the marimbas. You are a great blessing to us all! Thank you!

We are also in the final week of preparation for the service of Confirmation, next Sunday, when the Bishop will come to confirm our candidates. Today is also the first Sunday in spring – new beginnings, fresh leaves and new growth.

And we have recently concluded the four part sermon series, exploring themes in 1 Corinthians, engaging with some hot topics: Christian Marriage; Singleness (widows/widowers; divorce, single parents, singles); Homosexuality – which included the wide LGBTQI++ spectrum of sexual orientation; Sexual boundaries and holiness: appropriate sexual behaviour.

We are at a significant and interesting place as the Cathedral. A

crossroads. A turning point. It is a time of transition, change, new possibilities. Fresh calling. Opportunities. Excitement. Hope.

Sermon title: Burning bushes

OUR READINGS

Exodus 3:1-15

...is the call of Moses... the burning bush... the name of God... the call and encounter with God... This great life changing event takes place “in the realm of the mundane...in the course of his ordinary duties as a shepherd in the wilderness for his father-in-law”¹. But his everyday duties, his work and responsibilities as a shepherd, are close to the mountain of God. And there the Lord appears to Moses in the flame of fire, in the burning bush.

Guy Butler:

“When exiled Moses was tending sheep in the desert God spoke to him through something a shepherd would understand,
A bush blaze with life...”²

What happens at the burning bush?

God does two things. He calls Moses to be his instrument to set the people of Israel free from slavery in Egypt; and he reveals to Moses the name of God. God is initially “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6), the God of the covenant, the God of the ancestors – familiar, we know you...but then Moses asks God, “What is your name?”

¹ *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, pg 75

² Guy Butler, *Ntsikana's Bell*

In Hebrew, the name would often contain a definition of the character of the person who bears that name. So this question of Moses was important. What is the nature, the character, of the God we serve?

God answers, “I AM WHO I AM” or “I SHALL BE WHO I SHALL BE.” The name or word we call YAHWEH.

YAHWEH is based on the verb “to be”. It is translated as, roughly, “he will be”, or “he will cause to be”. Who God is and what he will be cannot be defined. YAHWEH is unknown. “He is not a tame lion.”³ No human being, not even Moses, can fully know the nature of God.

God is now far more than a tribal god, a local deity. He is, we now see, the God of all being, all existence. He is “the living God.... [He is] the eternal one who commits himself to constant relationship with his people....”⁴

Our small image, our limited, partial picture of God is blown apart when we are told the name of God. We do not control God or define him, nor can we limit him or put boundaries on Him.... When we come to worship, we come to encounter God in the burning bush, the God of mystery and wonder and awe and fear and revelation, the God who calls us, sends us, to set people free from slavery, sin, death. The God of liberation. The God of hope. The God of new beginnings.

The burning bush experience of God. The call and encounter that changes our lives, that changes us, that gives us a deeper understanding of God, God’s character, God’s name. That moment when we realise that we are on holy ground. The place of revelation. When God meets us, finds us, speaks to us, commissions us.

³ Aslan, in *The Last Battle* (Narnia series), by CS Lewis

⁴ *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, Dunn & Rogerson, pg 76

And, like Moses did in his everyday work as a shepherd, we discover the presence of God in the everyday, the ordinary. Holiness, encounters with God, burning bushes, on High Street. In Joza. On campus. At school. At work. In our ordinary, mundane, lives. The son of man who comes at an unexpected hour. Keep awake (Matt 24:42-44). Expecting the unexpected, the gifts, the miracles, the divine encounters. The presence of God in the everyday, the ordinary.

Eugene Peterson: “To those with eyes to see, every bush is a burning bush.”

The burning bush is also the difficult encounter and conversation that changes our image and understanding of God.

Peter’s challenge of Jesus (**Matt 16:21-28**) was in some way a burning bush experience: Jesus speaks of the path of suffering and death, and resurrection, that awaits him; Peter takes him aside and rebukes him; Jesus calls Peter a stumbling block, “Get behind me, Satan!” ... a new understanding... a new revelation... the path that Jesus was to walk, and the path of those who wanted to follow him, would involve suffering, defeat, death – and resurrection. A burning bush moment.

The path of discipleship for you and me which involves self-denial, a cross, and the road to Calvary.... The burning bush experience which changes us.

AND SO...BURNING BUSH MOMENTS

When we come to be confirmed, with the laying on of hands by the bishop, with the prayer that we may be strengthened with the Holy Spirit. Our burning bush moment.... The road of discipleship.... The way of the cross.... The invitation to follow Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Burning bush moments.

We come to hear the word of God through the scriptures read and proclaimed.... We come to the Eucharist, to receive the body and blood, the bread and the wine.... The commissioning of our head chorister, the induction of our choristers... these are all burning bush moments.

And these past weeks of reflection and engagement with our sermon series from 1 Corinthians have, I suggest, been something of a burning bush moment for us as the Cathedral.

I want to remind us of some of the key themes that emerged.

1. Diversity in our experience of families:

Husband and wife with child or children; single parents; children being raised by grandparents, child-headed households, step-parents, blended families (as partners with children from previous relationships form a new family), those who are divorced (and sometimes remarried), couples living together outside of marriage.

Diversity of single life: those who are not married: those who are widowed or divorced; people living on their own; young adults, students, teenagers, many of whom are eagerly exploring relationships, discovering love, finding intimacy.

2. Diversity in our understanding and experience of sexuality

We are familiar from early childhood with gender differences. A baby is born, and the first thing that the doctor says is “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!” Adolescents and teenagers, young adults, fall in love, are physically and emotionally drawn to others. It is a time for crushes and dates, romance and relationships, an unfolding longing for intimacy.

But also growing diversity and fluidity in the experience and understanding of gender and sexuality...

While the vast majority of people are born as either male or female, there is a broad spectrum of human sexuality, orientation and identity. And increasingly people are coming out as different from the accepted norm. This is not an easy road. Historically, much of society, including the church, has side-lined, marginalised or actively persecuted those who do not fit into the perceived norm of the “straight” heterosexual male-female relationship. While a heterosexual relationship and orientation is the experience for most people, it is increasingly clear that not everyone is “wired” in this way. How do we respond to, and live with, difference?

Is this wide diversity a sign of unhealthy lifestyle, poor choices, brokenness, sin? Or it is a sign of liberation, freedom, empowerment and choice? Are we in danger, as the church, of being sucked into a destructive, secular lifestyle and practice? Or are we being prompted to recognise the bigger picture and make room?

3. Call for a renewal of marriage and family life

I made a call for a renewal of marriage and family life amongst us all as the people of God; we should not view marriage as an optional extra, not really necessary, but rather as a very great gift, given for our good.... There is growing awareness of the harm done to children by an absent parent – usually the dad, but in some cases, the mother. Our children need both parents, as far as possible. There is a great deal to suggest that many of the problems we face as a society are due to broken families, absent parents. It is up to each young person – what sort of relationship do I want, for my life? Is there a better alternative? It is up to each of us, whatever our age or marital status, to nurture those around us, to be icons of love and stability and trust.

4. Holy relationships and appropriate boundaries

“ ‘Everything is permissible for me’, but not all things are beneficial...The body is not meant for fornication, but for the

Lord... your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit... glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:12, 13, 19, 20) With freedom comes responsibility...my behaviour should glorify God.

5. Same sex relationships

We looked at the several scriptures that are often referred to, when Christians talk about same sex relationships, and I pointed out that when read in context, these scriptures were referring to gang rape, sex with underage boys or girls – paedophilia; and sexual behaviour that was exploitative or that humiliated others.

I asked whether there is space, within our Christian tradition and belief, for the recognition and acceptance of committed same-sex relationships – and I suggest that, yes, there is.

6. Some general principles

- We are all created in the image of God (Gen 1:26)
- We have all been made by God, formed, “knitted together in my mother’s womb” (Ps 139:12)
- Our relationships with one another, with others, are based on the principle of love – “you are to love your neighbour as you love yourself” (Matt 22:39).
- Our intimate relationships with one another should have mutual respect, reverence, love for one another, “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21)

CONCLUSION

I am grateful to the Cathedral leadership, specifically clergy colleagues, churchwardens and PCC, for their support in all this as we have explored these matters; and for their eagerness that we continue with this journey.

What has emerged in discussions and thinking aloud, with PCC, Lay Ministers, and others, is that we are on a journey as the Cathedral: a journey towards inclusion and affirmation and non-discrimination.

We want to be a community of worship where all are welcome, where all feel and know that they belong: married and singles, those on their own, divorced and widowed, single parents; families, children, teenagers, students and young adults; and people in same sex partnerships and relationships.

May we as the Cathedral community be a burning bush, a place of encounter with God, holy ground, a place of transformation and hope.

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September 2017