

Sunday 10th February 2019 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		Epiphany 5 – Year C
Isaiah 6:1-9a	Ps 138	1 Cor 15:1-11
		Luke 5:1-11
A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN		

“They left everything and followed him.” (Luke 5:11)

INTRODUCTION

During these early weeks of 2019, our scripture readings return us again and again to the themes of hearing and responding to the voice and the call of God. Mary says to the servants at the wedding of Cana of Galilee “Do whatever Jesus tells you to do” (Jn 2). The people gather round Ezra and Nehemiah to hear and understand the word of God as it is read to them (Neh 8). Jesus reads from the book of the prophet Isaiah those words of glory and wonder “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and he has sent me to preach good news to the poor...” and then says, boldly, “this day this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4) – but he is met with anger and resentment. Not every good deed is welcome! Jeremiah hears the word of the Lord as it comes to him, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you... Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth...” (Jer 1).

Today we continue with the themes of hearing and responding to the call of God: The call of Isaiah; the call and conversion of Paul; the call of the first disciples – and lives are changed and worlds are turned upside down.

THE SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 6:1-9a Isaiah sees the Lord. It is a profound and overwhelming encounter with majesty and glory! Seraphs – angelic figures, great heavenly creatures – are in attendance, and the whole building shakes with their voices. Imagine deep, profound, spine-tingling, goose

bumps...as we hear their great cries, shouts of adoration and worship – words which we use in our Eucharistic prayers, “holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory”. The temple is filled with smoke, the clouds of glory. Isaiah is overwhelmed in wonder but also overwhelmed by his own unworthiness. A seraph brings a live coal, symbol of forgiveness and cleansing, and touches his lips. His guilt and sin is removed. Then after worship, after adoration, after cleansing, comes the great cry, the appeal, of the Lord, “Whom shall I send and who will go for me?” And Isaiah responds, “Here am I, send me!”

This pattern is repeated in our other readings:

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 Paul writing of the resurrection, refers briefly to his own encounter with the risen Christ – ‘lastly, as one untimely born, he appeared to me’; he is overwhelmed with the glory of God on the road to Damascus, he realises that it is the risen Christ whom he has seen; his life is changed forever; he writes “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15) – his conversion and encounter with glory does not become a cause for boasting or self-promotion; he is all too aware of the grace of God working in his life. His world is turned upside down.

Luke 5:1-11 In our gospel reading, Peter, James and John are fishing, but have caught nothing; Jesus uses one of their boats to speak to the crowds, and then comes the miracle of the great catch of fish from the deep water, from the unknown; Peter responds ‘Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man’; Jesus offers them a new life, a world turned upside down ‘From now on you will be catching people’ – and they leave their boats and follow him.

A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

An encounter with glory... our own unworthiness, sinfulness, inadequacy... forgiveness and blessing and assurance... sending out. Our world is turned upside down. We are profoundly changed, transformed, by what has happened. We are no longer the same

people. We have been changed. And we use big words to describe this. Conversion. Turning around. Being born again. Transformed from one degree of glory to another. A new creation. Moving from darkness to light. Falling in love with Jesus. Seeing the world with new eyes. A world turned upside down.

Michael Green, that great Church of England evangelist, said to students at Oxford, “I only have one life and I want to live it all for God.” This past week, I had the privilege of meeting with people who are exploring going deeper into ministry, possibly through ordination. I was profoundly struck, deeply moved, by what they said. They spoke of personal change, growth, transformation. “God healed me”, said one. For another, “My life changed when I was converted.” They spoke of love – love and compassion for people, especially those who were struggling; one person with her husband has a particular ministry to young married couples. Another has a life-long thirst for knowledge, learning, understanding. For another, there is a deep thirst for the scriptures, for God’s word in his life. Drinking deeply from the well of the Spirit of God. For another, there is a growing love for the Eucharist. For another, her life is spent reaching out to the poor and needy.

Each of those people would have said with Michael, “I only have one life and I want to live it all for God.”

I look around us, and I see a town in crisis. But I also see an amazing community working together. People gathering here in the Cathedral, and elsewhere, to pray for rain, in a way that I haven’t seen for many years. Makana Revive, and Cindy with her bakkie, collecting rubbish all over town, and taking it to the dump. A local boarding school who has cut their water consumption by half, in an effort to save water. Schools who have water taking water to schools without. Streets being cleaned by locals. People gathering together to ask and think what can be done. People articulating their hopes and dreams for Makhanda, for Grahamstown. Realising that we are living here together, and that we have to reach out to one another. People wanting to meet across barriers and divisions and to have those difficult conversations about

our past, our present, and our future. Wanting to remember and acknowledge the pain of our past, wanting to recognise and appreciate one another; and longing to build a future together.

We also have seen something of this as a nation, with the tragedy of the four school children who died at Hoerskool Driehoek. There has been an overwhelming response of love and sympathy, from all over. We have realised that people are people, children are children. When a young person or a student dies, we are all in grief. When blood is shed it is red, regardless of the colour of our skin. When we weep, we all weep real tears. No one has a monopoly on suffering.

And so we have a calling to build and work for peace. My concern with student protests at this time of year, again, is that the aims are commendable – for education, and for the doors of learning to be opened, for opportunities, for a future – but actions that deliberately escalate and build tension and seek confrontation are irresponsible. To burn buildings that have been built for education is misguided, foolish, and wrong. Nothing is gained, and so much is destroyed. And, almost inevitably, as everyone gets more and more angry and upset, someone ends up paying the ultimate price, as happened a few days ago at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). That death is an utter tragedy. We saw something of this escalation here at Rhodes in 2016; we are seeing it on other campuses around the country as we speak. Let's build, not destroy. We must have no part in actions that burn or break down or kill. I hope that as we approach election season, that Makhanda – Grahamstown – will show the rest of the country how to conduct ourselves. Let's be people of love and reconciliation wherever we find ourselves.

CONCLUSION

So let's come back, let's return to the heart of it all. Our vision of glory and of God. This is God who reveals his glory. God's call on your life and mine. Our awareness of our own brokenness, unworthiness, sin, how far we have to go, how far we are from what we should be - and our awareness of our struggling community. Our 4

need for conversion. But then, God's word of blessing and forgiveness. This is God who encounters us on the road to Damascus. This is God who brings us out of darkness into light. This is God who touches our lips with the burning coal, and fills us with compassion and love. This is God who meets us. This is God who calls. This is our God.

“I only have one life and I want to live it all for God” – Michael Green

“They left everything and followed him.” (Luke 5:11)

© Andrew Hunter
February 2019