

Sunday 19th January 2020 Grahamstown Cathedral 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Epiphany 2 – Year A
Isaiah 49:1-7	Ps 40:1-14	1 Cor 1:1-9
		John 1:29-35
Behold the Lamb of God		

“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29).

It is good to be back in the Cathedral, back home. I extend a very warm welcome to all who have been away! Although we are in the middle of January, we can still say happy new year to one another. May God bless each one of us in the year ahead. We give thanks for the rain at last, here and in Australia. We congratulate the successful matrices of 2019, with encouragement for those who were disappointed. There is always another chance, another door opening. And our prayers are with the family of Enoch Mpianzi, the Grade 8 pupil from Parktown Boys High School, in Gauteng, who drowned during a school camp this past week. Tragedies like that shake all schools, all families, wherever they are.

2020: a new decade and a new year. New beginnings for some, at school or university; some may be starting a new job or position at work; some are facing huge uncertainty, a fragile future. We stand together, as people have stood together over the centuries, facing the unknown.

OUR READINGS

Less than a month ago we celebrated Christmas. The Feast of the Epiphany was early in January. Our scripture readings since then have prodded us to ask and answer the question – who is this child that was born at Bethlehem? Who is this baby who was worshipped by shepherds and wise men? What is this great truth that has been revealed to us? Our scripture readings give us a number of insights.

Christ the Servant

The prophet Isaiah tells us of the Servant, called before birth, whose mouth is like a sharp sword, formed in the womb to be God's servant, and who will be given "as a light to the nations, that [God's] salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6b). The Servant is in turn the prophet himself; the chosen people; the Messiah, Jesus Christ; the people of God.

We read this prophecy with Christian eyes and see it fulfilled in Jesus. It is he who is called to be a light not only to the people of Israel, but to all the nations of the earth. He has been chosen by God: "the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel... has chosen you" (Isaiah 49:7c). Called, chosen, sent as God's servant.

Christ the Lord of the Church

The Epistles give us insights into the life of the early Church. St Paul writes to the church at Corinth and reminds them – and us – that as the people of God they – and we – are "sanctified in Christ, called to be saints"; given the grace of God in Christ Jesus, not lacking in any spiritual gift. "God is faithful" (1 Cor 1:9a). Jesus is the Lord of the church and the Lord of our lives. God does give every good gift that we need for ministry and for faithful witness. God will strengthen you to the end. Again, there is reassurance, promise, blessing, the faithfulness of God.

Christ the Lamb of God

In our Gospel reading, John the Baptist sees Jesus coming towards him and declares "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29).

There are two Old Testament images here: God provides a lamb for Abraham to sacrifice instead of his son Isaac (Gen 22). And on the night before the Passover and the deliverance from Egypt, the Israelites were instructed to slaughter a lamb and to smear its blood

on the doorposts of their houses. When the angel of death came to Egypt, the houses with the blood were safe from death. They were saved by the blood of the Lamb (Exodus 11-12).

At every Eucharist we say the words “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Jesus, the Lamb of God, comes to take away our sin – our brokenness, failures, offering forgiveness, restoration, healing.

It is tradition that pictures of John the Baptist will have him with a lamb. Sometimes he is pointing to it; sometimes blood is pouring from its side, perhaps being caught in a chalice. John the Baptist is the one who points Jesus out as “the lamb of God”. “So here at the start of the gospel story, we are shown how things are going to end, and why. Jesus is to die a sacrificial death for the sins of the whole world.”¹

From Tom Wright²:

“By the end of the story, St John (the gospel writer, not the Baptist) has made the meaning clear. The death of Jesus takes place, in this gospel, on the afternoon when the Passover lambs were being killed in the temple. Jesus is the true Passover lamb.

“John wants us to understand the events concerning Jesus as a new and better Exodus story. Just as God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, so God was now bringing a new people out of an even older and darker slavery.

“Who is this new people? In the original Exodus story, Israel is rescued from the dark powers of the world, which in that case meant the Egyptians under Pharaoh. But now, according to John, God’s lamb is going to take away the sin of the world itself. This can only mean that God’s rescue operation is moving out, wider than just Israel, to embrace the whole of creation.”

¹ Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*, 10

² *John for Everyone*, 10

In Jesus we meet the saviour of the world. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

AND SO...

1. This child born, worshipped by shepherds and angels and wise men, is the saviour of the world – not only a chosen few, but sent by God to bring life and hope to all people. He is the servant sent by God; he is the one who is the Lord of the church; he is the Lamb of God, given as a sacrifice to take away the sin of the world. Let’s worship him with all our hearts.
2. We are called and sent out, as servants of God, to be a light not only to the few, but to the nations. The prophecy from Isaiah is for us also, as we face the new year: you and I are called, chosen, hidden under the shelter of God’s hand.
3. God is faithful. You are facing a new year; God is faithful. You are facing what seems like an impossible mountain to climb; God is faithful. You are facing financial struggles; God is faithful. You are watching your family struggle and quarrel; God is faithful.
4. Let us be faithful. Let us serve, and worship, and witness; let’s not walk away from the challenges of ministry, the heartbreak at work, the broken lives, the struggles for good governance and water and electricity here in our own community – and in this regard I note and welcome the court ruling that ordered the dissolution of the Makana Municipality and the appointment of an administrator.

CONCLUSION

We face all this, and our own personal struggles and private battles, with the prayer that God would guide us and give us strength and wisdom and courage for whatever lies ahead.

And as so many have done before us, let us place our hands into the hands of God as he invites us to this familiar yet unknown journey of faith and trust.

Let today be a new beginning for each one of us: a new encounter with Christ the Lamb of God; invite him into our hearts; entrust our lives to him.

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Dean of Grahamstown
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