

Sunday 9th February 2020 Grahamstown Cathedral 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		Epiphany 5 – Year A
Isaiah 58:1-9a	Ps 112:1-10	1 Cor 2:1-12
		Matthew 5:13-20
DOES GOD EXIST?		

Statement from the Cathedral Chapter, 6th February 2020
(see attached)

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” (Matt 5:13)

THE BIG QUESTIONS OF LIFE

We acknowledge with pain, sadness and shame the incident of sexual assault in one of our East London parishes. The court case began this past Friday. Incidents like this fly in the face of all that we stand for and believe in. Something has gone badly wrong, and we need to do some serious soul-searching as we find the way forward. In the meantime, please let us hold all affected and involved, in our prayers. If you see stuff on social media, I suggest that you either refrain from commenting, or else refer them to the statement which I have just read. It can be found on the diocesan and cathedral Facebook page. And please feel free to raise any questions or concerns with me, and I shall do my best to answer.

We begin today with a three-part sermon series on “Big Questions”, big issues. Firstly, today’s topic, “Does God exist?” Secondly, next week (the Sunday closest to Valentine’s Day) “Where do I find love?” – all the questions around relationships, love, marriage, intimacy, trust, commitment, and what is God’s picture and purpose for us in all this. Thirdly, the Sunday before Lent (Transfiguration Sunday), “Where do I find hope?” – dealing with anxiety and stress and depression.

This series is particularly drawn up with students in mind, and so I take this opportunity to welcome students to the Cathedral, either as first years, or as returning students. It is good to see you! Our prayers are with you as you begin the academic year. And we pray that you will discover here at the Cathedral a community of faith and love, centred on Jesus Christ. Please relax and feel at home here amongst us.

Does God exist? Is there a God? If there is a God, why doesn't he answer my prayers? When tragedy or disaster strikes, when our world falls apart, where is God? When we witness the destruction of all that we love and revere, when our hopes and dreams are shattered, where is God? When we hear of brutal killings, rapes, torture, cruelty, where was God? "How can you speak of a God of love when this is what has happened?" We scream these questions in times of darkness, and we hear these questions hurled at us at university, in the streets, in our daily lives. There is blame and rage. I remember a grieving husband standing over the dead body of his wife, looking at me scornfully and saying, "Is this the work of a God of love?"

There is another challenge to belief in God, which comes in this form: "Do we even need religion? Surely as competent human beings in the 21st century, we have grown up, we no longer need the crutch of religion!" Religion, said Karl Marx, "is the opiate of the masses" – it is a useful drug used by the powerful to keep people content and peaceful, trusting in the world to come, an afterlife, when they should be rising up against their oppressors and changing the world for the better. Science, others argue, excludes the need for God as creator: all we see around us can be explained in scientific terms. There is no place or need for God.

Others say that religion, especially organised religion, is a fraud and a farce, a waste of energy and time; much evil has been done in the name of one or other religion; to give money to the church is to throw away money that could be used elsewhere. And there are those who have simply given up on religion, given up on the church. They

are not hostile; they are simply indifferent - the “post-Christian” mindset and outlook, prevalent in the global West.

At times, in the face of anger and rejection and mockery and indifference, it is a bold and brave person who can say, in all honesty, “I believe”.

THE SCRIPTURES

The question “Is there a God” is in some ways a philosophical question. How do we prove the existence of God? Much has been written and spoken, on all sides. I am not going to pretend to have the last word or to say all that can be said. And this is a sermon, not a lecture. So I wish to engage with the scriptures given to us for today, because they help us to find at least part of the answer.

Isaiah 58:1-1-9a – the universal ethic of justice and compassion

Isaiah was one of the great Old Testament prophets of Israel who spoke uncomfortable words to the people of God. They spoke truth to power. They challenged the status quo. They pointed out the sin of the nation. They called the people back to God. They highlighted hypocrisy and false religion. They comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable. They warned of disasters to come.

But they also spoke words of hope and promise. They pointed to what God had done and what God would do. They reminded the people of the faithfulness of God. Each prophet was unique to his time. But they spoke with one voice. They called the people to follow the commandments of God. They developed a universal ethic, a standard and way of behaviour, across the centuries, that is unique. It was an ethic of justice and compassion.

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring

the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isaiah 58:6-7)

We find this ethic of justice and compassion in the Great Commandment, the teaching of Jesus – love your neighbour as yourself; and in the teaching of other religious leaders of all faiths; this ethic of justice and compassion continues to inspire and challenge us today. You don't have to be Christian or a person of any faith to acknowledge this benchmark. But the point is that somehow as human beings, across nations and histories, we all have this profound sense of what is right and what is wrong – an ethic that points back to the heart of it all, points back to the source of all goodness, which is God.

Psalm 112:1-10 – a spiritual reality; search for meaning

The psalm for today picks up on the theme of the good man, or the good person, and the blessings that come to him. There is a link between the fear of the Lord, and obedience to the commandments. Worship of God goes hand in hand with holy living, a holy lifestyle.

“O praise the Lord. Blessed is the man who fears the Lord: and greatly delights in his commandments” (Ps 112:1).

The psalms also point to a universal experience of prayer and spirituality. The encounter with mystery. Receiving the life of God, the body and blood of Christ, at the Eucharist. The experience of God's power. Those times when we are caught up in wonder, love and praise. But also times when we encounter darkness, evil, evil spirits, oppressive presence, and we turn in fear and hope to God who delivers us and sets us free, and draws us into the place of light and love, and we *know* that there is a spiritual world.

The psalms also point to our profound longing for meaning and purpose in our lives. Who of us have not wondered, “What am I here for? Why was I born? Why am I here on this earth? Why am I going through this?” We want to know that what we are going through has

some purpose, some meaning to it, that our darkness and desolation, our sufferings and sorrows, have somehow an answer, an end, a greater purpose. To have lived, but to have lived without meaning, to have lived without purpose, is perhaps the greater sorrow.

1 Corinthians 2:1-12 – the historical person of Jesus

St Paul writes to the church at Corinth and reminds them of his preaching of the cross of Christ.

“So it was, my friends, that I came to you, without any pretensions to eloquence or wisdom in declaring the truth about God. I resolved that while I was with you I would not claim to know anything but Jesus Christ – Christ nailed to the cross.” (1 Cor 2:1-2)

Paul’s preaching pointed those early communities, and his writings point us today, to the historical person of Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection; and the experience and existence of the early church. We are not talking about some mythical figure, but about a real, historical human being. Jesus was born, died and rose again. Lives were transformed when they met with the risen Christ. The early church gathered and grew. And the church has continued over the past 2000 years in its witness to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Matthew 5:13-20 - our witness – salt and light

The call to be different, to be transformed people, to be salt and light – our living witness today. Our witness is the proof of God’s existence.

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” (Matt 5:13)

“Does God exist?” You and I, as people of God, are part of the answer to this one. Do we love one another? Then all will know that we are disciples, followers of Jesus Christ. Do we live lives of

holiness, honesty and truth? Are we people of justice and compassion? Is the church a community of integrity? Is it a safe place to be? When people see us, do they see Jesus? Are we the salt of the earth – do we bring healing where things are wounded and broken? Are we the light of the world – do we shine with the love and wonder of Christ? Do our lives point people to the living God? Because as we do so, others will see that God does indeed exist. They will see God in us.

AND SO... CONCLUSION

There are times – and for some of us this is such a time – when we despair over the church, our failures, our brokenness, our weakness. There are times when we fail one another and we fail God. People look at us in judgment.

But there are also times – and I suggest that this is such a time – when we dig deep, we rediscover our purpose and meaning as the people of God. Called to worship. Called to love. Called to serve. Called to trust. Called to witness to the wonder of God.

Some of you may be here in faith and trust, rejoicing in the praises and love of God, secure in your faith and in the loving arms of God. Some of you, on the other hand, may be hanging on by your fingernails, walking in darkness, calling for help with no one to answer, wondering if this is all a game and a joke and a farce.

Whoever, where-ever we are in this, let us today place our faith and trust and belief in the God who loves us, who embraces us, who invites us, who reaches out to us. And trust and believe for the day and week and time ahead.

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Dean of Grahamstown
February 2020

STATEMENT FROM THE CATHEDRAL CHAPTER OF THE DIOCESE OF GRAHAMSTOWN

6th February 2020

We as the Cathedral Chapter of the diocese of Grahamstown are aware of the widespread concern and anger following the arrest of a member of our church, and his subsequent court appearance on charges of sexual assault. The complainant is also a member of our church. We take this very seriously indeed and wish to make it clear that we stand firmly against all forms of gender-based violence. We are deeply disturbed by this incident.

When the report of the incident reached the Bishop, senior diocesan leaders were immediately sent to meet with the parish leadership and with the family of the complainant. Pastoral care and support has been provided to all involved. Clergy of the diocese have reached out to the family of the complainant and have been welcomed there. Ministry has also been given to the accused. Psychological and pastoral support has been extended to all others affected and has been well received.

We fully support the court proceedings currently under way. We have also launched our own internal processes. The accused has been suspended from all leadership responsibilities and offices in our church. On the advice of our diocesan Registrar (legal officer), we are waiting for the court proceedings to run their course and present their outcome and verdict.

In all this, we are guided by the ACSA Code of Conduct and Pastoral Standards, as well as our Safe Church procedures.

All of the above-mentioned supportive and intervention measures have been on the instruction of the Bishop, who is closely monitoring the situation and is holding all those affected in prayer and love. Let us all do the same in the days ahead.

Issued by The Dean of Grahamstown