

<b>Sunday 21st June 2020</b> <b>Livestreamed,</b> <b>Grahamstown</b> <b>9.30 a.m.</b>		<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost –</b> <b>Fathers’ Day</b> <b>Day 87 of COVID19</b>
Genesis 21:8-21	Ps 86:1-10, 16-17	Romans 6:1b-11 Matthew 10:24-39
<b>NO EASY WORD</b>		

“And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”  
(Matthew 10:30-31)

**FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT**

Today, June 21<sup>st</sup>, is Father’s Day. We give thanks for our fathers and ask God’s blessing on each one. It also marks the winter solstice: the longest night and the shortest day. From now, our days will gradually get longer as we move towards summer and the light - just as we are creeping towards health and freedom from the covid pandemic. But the darkness seems to continually reach out to drag us back into the swamp of despair. The five nuns from the Precious Blood community in Mthatha who died from Covid-19 this past week; more infections popping up here in Grahamstown; PicknPay closed yesterday with a staff member having tested positive; our provincial and national borders remain closed.

On Wednesday night this past week, President Cyril Ramaphosa spoke of “another pandemic that is raging in

our country – the killing of women and children by the men of our country”. At the moment our country is reeling with almost daily reports of gender-based violence, assaults, rapes, murders of women and girls. Hashtags are not going to solve the problem: it is we as the men of our country who need a wholesale conversion and heart change, so that our communities, our homes and schools and universities and churches and work places and streets, can be safe spaces. On Fathers’ Day, I say to all fathers, men, boys, this is our responsibility.

Angry debates and protests about the place of historic statues and symbols continue in the wake of Black Lives Matter. There is rage and fury and anguish all around us. Our schools are hotly debating race and racism. There is pain and anger. For some, each day is a struggle for survival. Young people especially here in SA, with Youth Day this past week, are looking for meaning and hope and a future in the midst of despair and uncertainty.

## **NO EASY WORD (1)**

It is with these and other matters on our hearts that we turn to the scriptures given to us, hoping for a way to navigate the rapids, to be given a blueprint, a plan, that will solve it all. But there is no easy word, no promise of deliverance, no quick fix here. Instead, when we want to find a word for vulnerable women and girls, or when we look for a word for fathers on Father’s Day, we have Abraham sending Hagar and Ishmael off into the wilderness. Abraham and

Sarah do not come out of this in a good light. They are the chosen ones, called by God, to give birth to the child of the promise. We expect the best from them. We look for help in our gender-based violence issues, for help to address patriarchy, and to encourage our fathers, and instead we are confronted with slavery, polygamy, power, a concubine being made pregnant at the will of her mistress, and then driven away by that self-same mistress, the outraged wife Sarah; Abraham as the absent father to his son Ishmael. It is not an easy story.

But we don't sanitise this or exclude this and other terrible events from the lectionary – the daily and weekly pattern of scripture readings given to us by the church. Instead, we re-examine and interrogate these ancient stories of love and hatred and faith and failure, these experiences of ill-treatment and injustice and oppression, a father who turns his back on his son, to find life and hope and an alternative narrative, one that leads us into freedom, one that provides hope for the Hagar of this world, those who are used and then cast aside; hope for the Ishmaels, whose experience of their fathers is one of rejection or neglect. There is a glimmer of this hope in the text: “God was with the boy...” (Gen 8:20). And this word of hope unfolds. God sees Hagar's need, and Ishmael's, and hears her cry. From being the outcast, driven into the wilderness, Hagar represents all outcasts who long for hope and life and a future. By the end of the story, she is no longer the outcast. Instead, she is the one who hears God speak, who is led to the well, and who raises her son. No easy word, this; instead, a word to

challenge and disturb, and ultimately to transform.

## **NO EASY WORD (2)**

And then we are given those hard, challenging words from Jesus in today's Gospel reading. There are five great blocks of the teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel; the first is the Sermon on the Mount – the way of life in the kingdom of God. Chapter 10 (we read part of it today) is the second such block. This second collection of the words of Jesus is a series of sayings or directions for those who are sent out – “thrown/driven out” was the phrase from last Sunday - to proclaim the kingdom of God.

St Matthew's Gospel was originally written for a Christian community facing persecution at the hands of others, because of their faith in Christ. These words can be applied to us now. It is a battle plan; it is the final briefing before the expedition leaves to climb Mt Everest; it is the game strategy for the team before they head out onto the field. It is a time for tough talking. There is a mountain to climb, a battle to fight. Things will get harder before they get better. Just as we found no easy word in the reading from Genesis, so we find no easy word in the gospel. The road ahead will take everything we have got.

“I come not to bring peace but a sword...whoever does not take up the cross is not worthy of me...whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:34, 38, 33). Just as Jesus faced suffering and

death, we, his followers, may well face the same; yet we shall know the care of the Father for us – even the hairs of our heads are numbered. “So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” We are not to fear the death of our bodies, only the death of our souls, which are of eternal consequence. To follow Jesus is not to enter a life of peace, but a life of conflict, division and hostility, even from those close to us. Yet those who “lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt 10:39).

## **AND SO...**

So here again, as with the story of Hagar, the gospel words bring us no easy word, but instead they bring both gift and challenge. We have to face and deal with these difficult words of Jesus; we can't bypass them in favour of something simpler, or more comforting. We have to embrace these words, allow them to upset us, and acknowledge how they disturb us.

But because we are in this time of turmoil, division, pain and anger, these are I think good words for us. There is the word that encourages us – you are worth more than many sparrows; even the hairs of your head are numbered; to comfort us – those who lose their life for my sake will find it; to warn us – I come not to bring peace but a sword.

This past week we had three highly significant days of remembering: June 16<sup>th</sup>, Youth Day, remembering the events of 1976; the commemoration of Bernard Mizeki,

teacher, evangelist and martyr, who died in the then Rhodesia in 1896; Bishop John Colenso, 1<sup>st</sup> Bishop of Natal, missionary, teacher, who died in 1883, excommunicated by the church for his beliefs, reviled for his stand for justice. Their lives, those times, were times of great crisis. We face a crisis now, in so many ways – conflict, rage, fury, hatred, fear, suspicion, violence, despair, oppression. In the midst of these storms that tear us apart, we live and bear witness to the good news of Jesus: that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; but we are all one in Christ Jesus. In the midst of hatred, we love one another. In the midst of gender based violence, we show respect and faithfulness and honesty in our intimate relationships; in the midst of division and fear, we do all we can to embrace, to reach out, to reconcile, to understand, to heal.

## **CONCLUSION**

“... even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”  
(Matthew 10:30-31)

“Hear my prayer, O Lord: and give heed to the voice of my supplication. In the day of my trouble I call upon you: for you will surely answer” (Ps 86:6f.)

...for you, Lord, are our life.

© The Very Reverend Dr Andrew Hunter  
Dean of Grahamstown  
June 2020