

5<sup>th</sup> August 2012 – 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
2 Sam 12:15b-25, Ps 34:11-22, Eph 4:1-6, Jn 6:24-35  
07:30 Grahamstown Cathedral

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For the past few weeks we have been exploring the Vision and Mission Statement of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. You are probably tired of hearing about ACT... Anchored in the love of Christ, Committed to God's mission, and Transformed by the Holy Spirit... Bear with us, today is the final instalment. We shall be investigating the Spirit's work of transformation. As we do this, it may be helpful to have in our minds the final clause of the Mission Statement: Across the diverse countries and cultures of our region, we seek to grow communities of faith that form, inform, and transform those who follow Christ.

Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night and experienced a completely numb arm? Happened to me a few weeks ago, it was rather distressing, especially in my half asleep state. I kind of flailed my arm around until the blood returned, and with the blood, feeling and mastery of my arm came back. To lose control of your body in this way, even for a short time is disconcerting. I can only begin to imagine how my mom deals with what she calls her numb and dumb right side after her stroke. And then there are those who suffer the cruelty which old age inflicts upon the body. Or what about those who suffer from Tourette's Syndrome or epilepsy or something else that causes you to do conspicuous and disturbing things that you are unable to control.

We Christians believe in the incarnation... God putting on flesh and walking among us. This involves huge risks and costs for God. Just for starters, think what it means for Christ's reputation. At least while incarnate in a single human body, Jesus was fully in charge of the public behaviour of that one human body. Paul reminds us that that we are one body. We, the Church, are the body of Christ in the world. But becoming incarnate in the church means Christ putting himself in a position where he can't even control the actions of his own body ie: the church.

It may be tempting to think of the idea that the Church is the body of Christ as being one of those rather rosy idealistic images that suggest that things are all peace and harmony and sweetness and light, when we know all too well that the church just isn't like that. The Anglican Church of Southern Africa has put together this wonderful Vision and Mission Statement, but the reality is that the Church is not in a great place. Our church is split down the middle on the issue of Homosexuality. Our Church growth statistics display that the number of Anglicans is declining. This 7:30am congregation of faithful worshippers by in large harkens back to time when things were done very differently... we are resistant to change and we tend not to mix easily with people who are different to us. What will this congregation look like in 20 years time? The Churches which Paul founded no longer exist geographically... the church, the body of Christ must transform or die.

The author of letter to the church in Ephesus sounds pretty aware of the challenges. In fact he starts off by pointing to the ideal and then saying, "I am down on bended knee begging you to do your best to live up to it." The first three chapters express some of the most erudite theology, profoundly solid orthodoxy or right thinking. And then we come to the passage we read, which acts as a bridge from orthodoxy to orthopraxy. In other words the author moves us, the listeners, from thinking correctly to acting correctly. This is often captured in the phrase: the longest journey is that from the head to the heart. In other words, it is one thing to know what is right and true and good, but it is quite another to put this into practice. The Author of Ephesians is well aware of the difficulties of being church.

Perhaps the image of the body actually tells us something about why being in the Church is often so difficult and painful. You see, it really is bizarre to say that the Church is a collection of all-too-fallible, dysfunctional, painful people and that it is at the same time the physical body of the perfectly loving God. Bizarre, but think about what Christ put his body through when he was incarnate in the body of a single person. He was flogged, spat upon, and hung up on steel spikes to die. Even before that he described his feelings as being torn apart inside, gutted, and heartbroken. Why would we think that being part of such a body would be all rosy and harmonious?

The painful reality and the massively daunting challenge is that to journey deeper into intimate relationship with Christ means to enter deeper into relationship with the ugly mob of people called the church. You can't draw closer to Christ the head while avoiding his body any more than you can marry some beautiful body without also having a relationship with its head.

Yet the Author addresses the Ephesians as saints, what are we to make of this? When the New Testament, especially St Paul, talks about 'holy people', it doesn't mean quite what we might mean by 'saints', it isn't offering a sort of verdict on a lot of spectacularly good lives. Christian people are holy simply because they have been adopted by God into relationship, we are the body of Christ. So the 'sharing between holy people' isn't some kind of club for the spiritually gifted; it's simply the relationship that holds together those who recognize and express their adoption by God. And so this sharing becomes tangible and visible when Christians are together just breathing the air of the Spirit, making real in words and actions who they are in relation to Jesus.

And what does this involve? The Author of the epistle gives us a clue when he refers to our one baptism. The Church is the community of those who have been 'immersed' in Jesus' life, overwhelmed by it. Those who are baptized have disappeared under the surface of Christ's love and reappeared as different people. The waters close over their heads, and then, like the old world rising out of watery chaos in the first chapter of the Bible, out comes a new world. So when the Church baptizes people, it says what it is and what sort of life its people live. Baptism is an event in which the 'sharing between holy people' comes to light and we see what the Church really is, a community in which people are constantly being brought into new life by the Spirit. We are given a new relationship with God and each other.

It is also the community of those who are invited to eat with Jesus, who names himself the bread of life. Just as, in his earthly life, Jesus expressed his promise to create a new people of God by sharing meals with unlikely people, just as, after the resurrection, he shares food with his disciples as he re-calls them to their task, so it is with the whole Church. We are in the Church because we have been invited, not because we have earned our place. And so when the Church gathers to eat and drink with Jesus in Holy Communion, the Church once again says who and what it is. In baptism and Holy Communion, the nature of the Church is laid bare for us. What is the Church? Is it simply those who have been immersed in, soaked in the life of Jesus, and who have been invited to eat with him and pray to the Father with him.

Christ embraces us in our brokenness and gathers us into his wholeness so that we might be healed and reconciled to God and to one another. And his wholeness is a wholeness born of much suffering and grief. Perhaps in closing, it might be easier to recognise the good news in this when we look at it from God's side. All of us are broken people who fail to respond properly to Christ and who grieve God and wound one another as a result. If we had to stand before God individually, with nothing to show but the results of our own mistakes, failures and a few modest successes, we'd be sure to stand condemned. But we don't. We have been baptised into the body of Christ, and so instead of us coming one at a time, it is Christ who stands before God, and we are therein him, all together as his body. So instead of seeing us in all our individual mess, God sees Christ who loved to the full, and sees our brokenness and dysfunction, not as reason to condemn us, but as the wounds and scars in the body that was offered and broken and poured out for the life of the world. And that friends is very, very Good News!

Amen