

Sermon Preached at the Cathedral of St. George and St. Michael on 10 March 2013;
Evening Prayer

Text: Mark 8: 11 – 21

Revd Dr. Harold Lewis, a visiting lecturer from the USA started the year with us at the College of the Transfiguration this year. He left on Wednesday last week. Revd Harold has been at the college before, twice, during the late Revd Livingstone Ngewu's time as Rector and during Revd Janet Trisk's time as Acting Rector.

At our opening staff meeting this year, he had an issue with the college: upon his arrival, on a Shuttle, he thought, for starters that he had come to a wrong place. Why? Three things: there was no sign in Worcester street, as was the case before, with the College details; secondly, upon entrance into the college grounds, nature had been left to take her natural course, reminiscent of a deserted place. Thirdly, what used to be the Rectory, with the label 'Rector's Residence' still in intact, did not suggest current occupancy at all. Then, from somewhere, he thought, someone emerged to assist him. Revd Harold needed an explanation.

Yes, an explanation did come: firstly, he arrived three weeks before the college had opened, hence the state of the college grounds. Secondly, owing to the renovations and infrastructural developments currently happening at the College, the sign post had been uprooted for renewal. The formerly Rector's Residence, as part of this renewal process, has been turned into staff offices.

Nevertheless, Revd Harold's point still remained: how would an outsider or a visitor know that these developments were in process if there was no sign to inform that; ie a temporary indicator that this site was still the College grounds; or that the Rector's Residence had relocated to 2 Harrismith Street? We gladly appreciated his observation; we accepted correction.

Now, how does this connect with the message of this sermon?

In the gospel passage read for us this evening, with 11 verses, Jesus asks his disciples and others 10 questions (so 10 questions in 11 verses). The questions are: why does this generation ask for a sign? Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect? And the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect? Do you not yet understand?

The third and last of these questions are pivotal to an understanding of what Jesus is teaching in this particular context. It needs to be said that the text (or the 11 verses read for

us this evening) are part of a long discourse in Jesus' ministry in Mark's narrative when Jesus was deeply concerned about a lack of understanding in his hearers, even his disciples. He had just performed three miracles before this teaching and yet his audience does not at all seem to understand what was going on. In the fashion of a teaching and learning environment, Jesus being a prolific teacher of all time, asks his listeners probing and recollection questions. Amazingly, the responses are spot on. So, where is the problem? This is where Jesus' disappointment lies.

In education, memory, perception and understanding are key terms. The goal in education is understanding which should ultimately translate into transformative action. Perception, if understood to be the ability to attach meaning to given information, should precede understanding. As such, accumulation of data or information without perception is meaningless.

Revd Harold's request would aptly connect with this understanding. For him to understand that the college was still at 13 Worcester Street, he needed information to that effect despite the fact that the original sign with College details had been pulled down. He also needed information to the effect that the formerly Rector's Residence had been turned into teaching staff offices and that the Rector was now residing at 2 Harrismith Street: concrete information, leading to perception, and ultimately to understanding.

This, said and done in a secular teaching and learning environment would be easy to understand. Jesus' teaching environment is different. Unlike what would constitute subject matter in a secular teaching context, Jesus, as God incarnate, is the subject of his teaching: God in the midst of creation; God working with and through humanity. Had his audience not seen the miraculous things which he had just done? What other sign did they need to perceive his ministry?

In a text that comes immediately after the 11 verses read for us this evening, Jesus heals a blind man. Upon gaining his sight, Jesus asked him what he could see. The response is interesting. The man said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." The man's full sight was restored after Jesus had laid his hands on him again.

What does this say about the state of his audience in terms of understanding his ministry? As I have said before, the goal of education is transformative action. It should be emphasised here that transformation is not an event; it is not achieved over night; it is a process. It needs constant review of progress done and follow up redress of loop holes or weaknesses identified in the course of processes. Jesus precisely does this in the 11 verses read for us this evening. The 10 questions are actually part of his teaching strategy; they reinforce teaching done previously by word and through miraculous acts.

In line with the Messianic Secret motif which characterizes Mark's gospel, Jesus in the gospel text for tonight, is disappointed with his disciples but has not lost hope on them. Like

the blind beggar who gains his sight in stages, spiritual formation or transformation towards Christ likeness, is a life's journey. Maturity in Christ is not an event but is built on life encounters with a God of mercy and love through fellowship with God's son, Jesus Christ, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

"Keep your eyes on the ball" is a popular phrase with ball games coaches. Belief in Jesus Christ opens the eyes and ears to significant levels of perception which should lead to in-depth understanding and practical action.

So, what do we take home tonight? The 10 questions which Jesus asks his audience are central to the mission and evangelism of the church, particularly the Anglican Church across the globe. I recommend each and every one of us to do further reflections on these questions in view of our individual and corporate levels of maturity in Christ. A church historian, Jonathan Hill said something very interesting about Church history in his book 'The History of Christianity'. He said: "Christianity is by turns violent, inspiring, shocking, tragic, comic, or just plain bizarre, it is certainly never dull."

I end with a question: in our Christian witness, lived and practised in specific contexts, when would we say the Anglican Church is inspiring? I am interested in that sense of an understanding of Christianity as suggested by Jonathan Hill because therein lies perception and understanding of Christ's ministry as recorded in the bible, particularly the gospels and required of us to put into practice in our lives, local communities, countries, etc.

I now invite the congregation to recite selected verses from the psalm appointed for this service. As we do so, I ask that we connect what the psalmist is saying and what the gospel message shared tonight is inviting us to reflect on. Amen.