

Sunday 17th March 2013 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		5th Sunday in Lent – Year C Admission of Church Officers
Isaiah 43:16-21	Psalm 126	Philippians 3:4b-14
		John 12:1-8
Water in the wilderness, rivers in the barren desert		

“Stop dwelling on past events and brooding over days gone by. I am about to do something new; this moment it will unfold. Can you not perceive it? Even through the wilderness I shall make a way, and paths in the barren desert. The wild beasts shall do me honour, ... for I shall provide water in the wilderness and rivers in the barren desert...” (Isaiah 43:18-19)

I want to begin by thanking all who attended our Annual Vestry Meeting last Sunday, and for the commitment that there is to the life and mission of the church. We had a very good meeting; reports were well received; there was lots of participation. We ask God’s blessing on our newly elected team of churchwardens and parish councillors as they are admitted to office this morning.

Words of hope

The words of the prophet Isaiah were spoken to a nation which had lost hope. The people of Israel had been taken into exile some 50 years earlier. The temple in Jerusalem – the sign of God’s presence amongst them - had been destroyed. The king no longer ruled. The land – the land promised to them by God – was occupied by foreigners. All the reminders of their past, the visible signs that God was with them, had been taken away. They were a people without a land, a people without a future, a people who had been forgotten by their God, a people without hope.

It was into this situation of hopelessness that God spoke through the prophet Isaiah. “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I call you by

name; you are mine.... I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your deliverer.” (43:1b, 3a) I am about to do something new. I shall bring you back. I shall make a way. “I shall provide water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.” (43:20b)

These words were spoken to a people in exile, who were about to see the tides turn, who were about to see that God had not forgotten them, that God would indeed do something new, and restore them to their promised land. They had a future.

We receive these words of hope into our lives today – into what may be our places of exile, our despair; our wilderness.

The wilderness

Lent is a time when we go with Jesus into the wilderness. For the people of Israel, as they spent forty years in the wilderness on the road to the promised land, the wilderness was the place where they learned to trust in God. They learned to depend on God for their every need – food, water, shelter, protection, guidance. And God did provide. For those forty years, as they wandered, their shoes and their clothes did not wear out; they had food and water; they followed the cloud by day and the fire by night.

What is our wilderness experience? For many of us, the word “wilderness” means a desert. The dry, barren places, where there is no food, no water, no sign of life. The place or season in our lives where we have nothing, where we have lost everything. It can be the breakdown of a marriage, or the end of a deeply significant relationship. The death of a loved one. Months of depression. Loneliness. Desolation. Despair. Hopelessness. Rejection. Sense of failure and futility. Our frustration and disillusionment with the institution, the structure that is meant to be a source of life and hope. The wilderness that is a picture of education in the Eastern Cape; the wilderness and barrenness of service delivery, corruption, poor governance.

Yet it is there, in the wilderness, that like the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness, we have no-where else to turn but to God, for strength, for guidance, for help, for our every need. As Paul wrote, “My one desire is to know Christ...” (Phil 3:10a)

If you have ever done the trip up the N1 from Cape Town, towards where you turn off to Graaff-Reinet, you will know how the countryside changes – from the lush vineyards and orchards, mountains and trees of the Western Cape, the Hex River valley, and into the dryness and vast expanse of land towards Beaufort West and beyond. Life is harsh in the wilderness. At first, there is not much to see. No big trees. No lovely orchards, or rivers. Not many signs of life. But then as you look more carefully, you begin to see a sheep here or there; a farm-house in the distance; a herd of cattle; some ostriches; a windmill with its cement dam; even a couple of Karoo beetles. There is life – but you have to look for it.

And those small signs of life are there in the lush Western Cape as well, but because of the big trees, the rivers, the vineyards, you don't notice the rest.

My experience of ministry has been often of the wilderness, times of struggle and aloneness and drought, times of despair and frustration; but with occasional oases, water, signs of life and light, Karoo beetles. The wilderness has helped me notice the little things. It has made me appreciate the small signs of life that are around us. In spiritual terms, the wilderness makes us depend more and more on God as our source of strength and life – because there is no-where else to turn.

Water in the desert

And there is water in the wilderness, rivers in the barren desert. These past few days have reminded me why it is so special to live in Grahamstown. The streets have been full of youngsters from schools all over the country, as pupils have flocked to town for the annual

Scifest. On Friday afternoon Claire and I attended the opening of a wonderful art exhibition by one of our world-class local artists. Music was echoing – does music echo? – across town for much of Saturday, as PJ Olivier hosted their annual sports gathering. There has been life and energy and excitement – so much hope for the future, emerging – all right here on our doorstep. *Water in the wilderness, rivers in the barren desert.*

New leadership means new beginnings, new possibilities. We welcome the commitment to service delivery made by the Mayor of Makana at the recent opening of the Makana Council. We give thanks for the election of Pope Francis I, and pray for him as he takes up the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. We pray for Archbishop Justin Welby, new Archbishop of Canterbury, as he is enthroned this coming week (March 21st – Human Rights Day). We pray for our lay leaders here in the Cathedral, as they assume office, and we thank God for them. Friends, your faithfulness to God is like water in the wilderness, a river in the barren desert.

And as we worship and journey together as the people of God at the Cathedral, we are like Mary and Martha and Lazarus who were with Jesus (in our Gospel reading, Jn 12:1-8), shortly before the Passover, his betrayal and death – and yes, Judas Iscariot was there also. Some of us here are like Martha – we are those who serve, and make things possible for others with our willing service. Some of us here are like Lazarus – we have come to new life, we have been raised from spiritual death, we see life and the world differently because of what Jesus has done in us. Some of us here are like Mary – we have taken all that we are, and poured ourselves out at the feet of Jesus.

In the midst of us all, is Jesus – who is the sign of hope, the sign of new life, because he has offered up his life so that we may have life.

God's promise of hope, renewal, new possibilities is true because Jesus died and rose again; because Martha serves, because Mary offers all that she has, because Lazarus testifies to the new life he has

received. The things that you and I do. The life we live as faithful disciples of Christ.

CONCLUSION

“Stop dwelling on past events and brooding over days gone by. I am about to do something new; this moment it will unfold. Can you not perceive it? Even through the wilderness I shall make a way, and paths in the barren desert. The wild beasts shall do me honour, ... for I shall provide water in the wilderness and rivers in the barren desert, where my chosen people may drink, this people I have formed for myself, and they will proclaim my praises.” (Isaiah 43:18-21)