

Sunday 28th April 2013 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.; 7 p.m.		Easter 4 – Year C Fifth Sunday of Easter Freedom Sunday
Acts 11:1-18	Ps 148	Revelation 21:1-6
		John 13:31-35
If there is this love among you...		

“I give you a new commandment; love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. If there is this love among you, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.” (Jn 13:34-35)

We congratulate our Sub-Dean, the Reverend Mzinzi Dyantyi, and his beautiful bride, Nokuzola, on their wedding yesterday (Freedom Day). We thank God for their love for one another; for their families who have nurtured and journeyed with them – and agreed about the lobola; and we pray God’s blessing on Mzi and Nozo in their married life together.

Thank you to the Cathedral family for all your love and support and prayers for us as a family, following the death of Claire’s mother Gabrielle, this past Friday. Many of you – many of us - have been praying for Gabrielle and for our family over these past six weeks or so; thank you for your ongoing prayer and love. We are sustained by your faith and hope.

Yesterday was Freedom Day, 27th April, 19 years since our first democratic elections, a time to reflect on the journey we have walked since then, as a country.

The new commandment

In our Acts reading (11:1-18), we are presented with the beginning – the Spirit poured out, barriers broken down, the beginnings of this remarkable new family of those who belong to Jesus Christ, with all the wonder and awkwardness of new relationships, generations of

suspicion and prejudice and misunderstanding and hatred and fear having to be faced and put aside.

In our reading from Revelation (21:1-6) we are shown the end – the new heaven, the new earth – the picture of when all will be brought together, the time when God will be with his people, there shall be an end to death, to mourning, to crying, to pain, for the old order will have passed away.

And in the Gospel reading we are shown the means, the way to get there – love one another.

The new family

What does it mean to love one another?

When our children were born, Claire and I discovered what it meant to be family. It meant that whatever happened, we belong together. Forever. We shall never not be family. That's the basis for our life together. We choose our friends, but we do not choose our family. As Christians, we belong together because of what Christ has done in breaking down the barriers that divide us. By our baptism we are joined together. As much as we are different, or diverse, or come from different places, see things differently, here we belong. We are brothers and sisters, in Christ. We might argue, disagree, be angry, fall out, want to walk away, turn our backs – and what family is perfect? But the foundation for our life together is that we are one family.

In this family, it is love makes all the difference. Love redeems and restores and changes. Love transforms. Love changes the way we treat one another. Love forgives. Love one another in the same way Jesus loves us – by giving his life for us. It means we belong to one another, not because we choose to, or because we like one another, but because we are family. Love does not give up or walk away. Love goes the extra mile. Love forgives. In the children's movie *Shrek* – which I watch and enjoy immensely - Shrek says to Donkey, "If I treat you so

badly, then why did you come back, huh? Donkey replies, “Because that’s what friends do, they FORGIVE EACH OTHER!” We would say, “that’s what family does, they LOVE ONE ANOTHER!”

Let’s do all we can to build community, to reach out beyond our bubbles, our friendship circles, to embrace the stranger, the outsider. Who are the outsiders, those who are excluded? What are the barriers that we see? Gender? Sexuality? Language? Culture? Age?

With much said on Freedom Day about how far we have journeyed as a new democracy, how far we are along the road to freedom, we must ask ourselves, “How far have we loved?”

Synod, and Breaking the Silence

Being family means we share our lives, share our joys and sorrows. Cathedral clergy and churchwardens (who were the elected lay representatives to Diocesan Synod) attended Diocesan Synod last week (17th – 20th April). Being in Synod is part of our life together, as the church, the family of God.

We were called to centre our lives on the Trinity, the life of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and to make a difference in the world around us. Matters discussed included servant leadership, theological education, the role of the church in our schools, marketing and communication, church governance, human sexuality, administration and financial policies, development, civic education and involvement, family life, and violence against women and children.

Synod took place at the same time as the annual “Breaking the Silence” day, arranged by the office of the Dean of Students at Rhodes University, as a protest against gender-based violence, and I want to say a bit about this.

As has happened in previous years, the Breaking the Silence culminated in the Cathedral, with about 1500 students present. The

testimonies of the rape survivors who spoke out, were horrific, deeply moving, terribly sad, heart-breaking. Yet it is very good that the organisers, and the participants, request each year to gather in the Cathedral for this event, and that they find here a sacred space. Some of you were understandably upset to see the mess left here; the arrangement was that it would be cleaned up on the Saturday, which is what was done. Many of the students have their mouths taped shut for the day, and so neither eat nor drink. They are given a welcome snack when they get here. A mess is perhaps inevitable.

The Breaking the Silence event itself is not an act of worship, and this year there has been much debate as to the place of prayer, during the Cathedral gathering. Some of us want to reach out with love and compassion and offer prayer. For others, this is not welcome. Nor is this a specifically Christian event: it is for people of all faiths, and none; it is for people who are comfortable with prayer, and for those who are not; it is for people for whom God is a loving father-figure, and it is for people for whom the words "God" and "Father" are immensely painful and a source of much hurt and distress. It is for people who are comfortable in church, and for those who are not.

Many of us who were present that evening were struck by the large number of speakers who told of the way their fathers, or father-figures in their families, had abused or molested them; or who spoke of the way they had prayed, and God did not answer or protect them. For a number of these young women, the place of prayer (and the use of phrases such as "in the name of the Father") was difficult, particularly for those who were not Christian, or who had been abused by their own fathers, and who struggle with the immense evil of abuse that is so prevalent.

One of our Cathedral students (Annie Fleischack) wrote afterwards: "I thought that the stories which the women shared were harrowing and heart-breaking and a harsh reminder that there is a long way to go before society is in a good place. So many different stories and some with no time to tell. The women were very brave and some had been

carrying their stories for many years before feeling ready to share it. I feel that THIS VIOLENCE MUST END and should not go by without something being done about it.”

CONCLUSION

Let us bring before God our experiences of pain and trauma, whatever they may be, and receive healing and strength from God, as we do so.

As the country celebrates Freedom Day, let us acknowledge both the successes, and the failures, of these past 19 years, and offer what we can to build true freedom for all.

We do all this in the faith and in the name of the Risen Christ, who has overcome evil and sin and death, and invites us to share in the risen life that he offers.

May we grow in our love for one another, so that all may see the presence of the Risen Christ amongst us.