

## **160<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Cathedral Church of St Michael and St George, Diocese of Grahamstown.**

2 November 2013, Memory Hall,  
St Andrew's Preparatory School,  
Grahamstown.

I am honoured to be here tonight with the community of Grahamstown and the fellowship of the Cathedral Church of St Michael and St George, Diocese of Grahamstown to celebrate 160 years of the establishment of this Mother Church of the then recently established Diocese of Grahamstown. This, if I may say so modestly, is not an honour that I deserve: I am not and have never been local to Grahamstown, although I am very proud of my roots in the Eastern Cape; I am not a historian, not of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa nor of the City of Grahamstown or the Eastern Cape, but I am a lawyer and a theologian. And yet it remains a signal honour to be here on this occasion.

What I wish to share, actually, is a very simple idea. It is an exploration of the nature and character of the church in the new democratic and constitutional dispensation in South Africa, or what may sometimes be referred to as a church in mission and evangelism (sometimes referred to as 'a missional church'). This is a question that arises frequently in my puzzlement about the state of the church, its self – understanding, and the role of the church in public life. Equally, it speaks to what I regard as utter confusion especially in politics in our country about how state and church could best relate to one another, or how the language of faith finds itself expressed in a variety of political justifications. I shall be exploring a theological response to the faith imperatives that shape our society.

You will, understand, of course, that I am old enough to remember a time in the not too distant past when the church was not just vocal in the struggles for justice and equality, but also in its public witness to the power of God in society to change and transform a human dispensation characterized by sin, to so self-destruct, discredit the very foundations of what it purported to stand by, and was ultimately transformed out of existence. Yes, you might say, correctly, that the church, including the Anglican Church, was somehow driven kicking and screaming at times to take a stand against apartheid. But apartheid was also destroyed by the lies that exposed its truth claims. In other words when Beyers Naude, the Christian Institute and others (I am thinking of the *Belydende Kring*, and the Belhar Confession)

exposed the lie and heresy of apartheid it could no longer have any theological and ethical foundations that somehow had sustained it.

As far as our church was concerned, however, while we never made apartheid a canon of faith practice, the church continued to practice apartheid within its own ranks for an embarrassingly long time. Who will forget, for example, the struggles about the wall plaques at the cathedral in Grahamstown that bore the triumphalism and blood-curdling hatred and incitement of a racialised, colonial and imperial past, that for too long we had lived with, worshipped with, in and around, and allowed to be part of our Christian and Anglican consciousness? Who can deny that in far too many of our churches the Anglican identity was structured according to the racist patterns of the white superiority complex of its time – blacks were not to be received in worship in “white” churches, notwithstanding the injunctions by the Bishops, and for which Geoffrey Clayton died having penned a letter declaring that the Anglican Church would defy any law that prohibited common worship. Yes, elite Anglican schools continued to operate according to the diktat of apartheid, and for too long delayed the challenge that faith would have demanded. Yes, in spite of the bold stand that Ambrose Reeves took against the *apartheidisation* of schools, many schools continued in the apartheid format.

The reality, of course, is that though never legislated by canon, far too many Anglican churches practiced *apartheid* in their churches. Who could not be aware that it was not until 1916 that the first Black South African was ordained priest in our church; and not until 1960 that Alpheus Zulu was appointed Suffragan Bishop of St John’s Diocese, some 112 years since Robert Gray established the Anglican presence in this southern tip of Africa. Black people had been mere objects of mission but hardly ever recognized as equal to the white (usually British) Anglicans. Black Clergy were hardly to be found in the hierarchies of the church. I am always reminded that in 1521 the Pope Leo X (significantly, a year after this reforming Pope had resisted the Reformation by another young monk, Martin Luther whom he excommunicated in 1520!) insisted on appointing the young Dom Henrique, a prince of the Kongo Dynasty, the first Bishop of Uttica! When we remind ourselves of those moments of shame for the church, we remember that even today we have far to travel to redeem the past.

I am not saying that only in order to blunt the justifiable pride we often have about the witness of the church against apartheid, and we mention esteemed Anglican divines in the process: (perhaps I ought to begin with the much maligned and least understood John Colenso, recently rehabilitated!) Ambrose Reeves, Joost de Blank, Trevor Huddleston, ZK Matthews, James Calata, Oliver Tambo – the list is endless!

My point really is to say that given that, what is the nature of the church and of Christianity that we present to this new South Africa today? In that list there is the finest Anglican theology and spirituality, and some dogged advocacy for justice.

160 years is a very long time, especially in an social and historical environment like ours where history is computed and recorded only from the vantage point of the conquerors and the indigenous history is hidden and easily forgotten (I remember as a Curate in Milton Keynes, North Buckinghamshire, Diocese of Oxford, at our 12<sup>th</sup> century Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, Woughton on the Green, where a great deal of the evidence of Roman Britain was evident, this church built along the Roman route from London, (the Watling Road) and alongside the Grand Union Canal, was a source of much contemporary historiography, from Americans and Canadians and Australians and New Zealanders – they swarmed the graveyard during the Summer, and pored through the ancient registers to build their family trees!)

But we know that 1853 was a propitious time in the history of the British colonialism in the Cape. Indeed, the state of the Xhosa people was to be changed for ever following the War of Mlanjeni (1851-1853), and that was soon followed by the disastrous apocalypse of Nongqawuse's Millenarianism – a religious and prophetic response to the catastrophe of the hopeless fortunes of the nation! Yes, it was a mere three years before the Cape was to witness a near total annihilation of Xhosa resistance through the Nongqawuse Apocalypse in 1857. Clearly, where war had failed the Xhosa people put their trust in divine intervention to reverse their fortunes. Some 5000 passes were issued by the colonial authorities in 1858 to the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape to settle in white farms as serfs and as landless chattels. In that environment the role of the church became significant as more and more indigent people made their way into the missionary villages completely at the mercy of the white colonial society. Where the missionary campaigns had failed a war of conquest achieved. In some way, therefore, who would deny that a place like the Parish Church of St Michael was depicting some of that triumphalism at the heart of the territory of Ndlambe, to signal conquest and substitution of one people by the other. OK, I grant that that is only a particular and not unbiased reading of history. What is undeniable however is the interaction of faith and politics in the construction of the religion of the Cape, and not least of the Anglican identity.

I mention all this only to show that the colonial church was part and parcel of the concept of power and triumph that marked Christendom from the Constantinian period, when the church became the church of the empire. It was a time of grandiose faith, and institutionalized religion. The Anglican Church, no less, was basking in the

glories of colonial and imperial triumph. Power and glory, it could be said, defined the nature of the church as can be found in so much Victorian hymnody.

I have been having mixed feelings about how best the church defines itself in the current environment. The first approach, which I decline, is that the church is overshadowed in secular power, plays an insignificant role in national life, and acts merely as a handmaid of secular power, otherwise it has no existence of its own. On that paradigm, the church operates completely at the margins of society, is inward looking, diffident and lacks confidence, and is even apologetic about its claims and beliefs. The other is a triumphalist church. A church of power and influence; prominent in the circles of the powerful, is almost inextricably intertwined with the doings of state almost without distinction, and its message becomes indistinguishable from the aspirations of the political elite that control all the realms of society, and sings and dances to the tune of *Umshini wam!!!* Either way, the church fails to be the church.

The image I have though is one taken from Paul's letter to the Romans (11:1-6). It begins with the self-consciousness of being the object of pity "Lord they have killed your prophets; they have demolished your altars; I alone am left and they are seeking my life." That is a counsel of despair that causes one to surrender or simply get into a hell-hole of fear. But the Lord had other plans for Elijah. "I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed a knee to Baal." The assurance being that "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace." The revelation could have been just like that of Jacob at Bethel, waking up from a dream, and he realized like a bolt from the blue, "Surely, the Lord is in this place – *and I did not know it*" (Gen 29:16). And so while we do not know it God is at work almost in spite of our own dreams and efforts. Faith gives us that sense of wonder, and awe, and confidence – in the knowledge that God is with us.

The expression "the remnant" is well chosen by Paul. It has a history from the Hebrew Scriptures as the insignificant few who remain faithful to the purposes of God even against great odds. It is the new Israel, God's own people, who are no longer capable of rebelliousness because "I will set my law within them and write it in their hearts; I will become their God and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:33). In the Christian Scriptures this state of being at one with God, a state of righteousness, in Pauline language, is designated as hope. The 'remnant' is the stubborn seed that bears the germ of new growth, and will neither be destroyed nor die. The remnant signified the faithfulness of God, and that this faithfulness is not assured by power or by armies or legions of the powerful, but by the elect few who bear the seeds of new life. In other words, the "remnant" is a sign of hope, the church. In other words,

there is hardly any evidence of the New Testament church being an institution of power and influence but rather of hope. In other words it was an institution that reflected and exuded that which it promised. There was not here a mission determined by numbers or crowds, but that mission is fulfilled to the extent that those who profess the Christian faith remain faithful to the promises of Christ, and their lives, bearing and profession of faith is consistent with that which they believe. In other words, a view of faith and mission of the church is neither one of fear and subservience to earthly powers, nor is it finding common cause with secular powers. Rather it is faithfulness to Christ.

In recent statements and sermons, the Archbishop of Canterbury The Most Revd Justin Welby, seems to be echoing these sentiments. "Justice faints and hope fades", he says in a sermon at Reykjavik Cathedral in Iceland at a service marking the 8<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Porvoo Communion of Churches, "when the church looks in on itself. The kingdom of God is proclaimed by a church that is caught up in the glory of God and the reality of the world." A previous Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey said something similar about being a theologian. He said that being a theologian "is to be exposed to the vision of heaven and the tragedy of humankind." Ramsey, sometimes called the Archbishop of "glory", because he was always fascinated by the events at the Mountain of Transfiguration, the dazzling glory, the transformed being of Christ, and the transfigured Christ in human form, to the Christ of glory; from the Jesus of the Crucifixion to the Risen, Ascended Christ glorified. Archbishop Welby, however, goes a step further. He says that the great purposes of God are delivered by a church with a vision of heaven and feet that walk the dust of the earth.

This means that as the church we are neither a pitiable and insignificant wretch, nor a church of power and influence, but that we become a church not because of our numbers, but by the quality of our Christian witness, by the clarity and consistency of our Christian proclamation, and by our faithfulness to the dictates of the gospel. When we do that and to that extent, we share with the world a glimpse of heaven, the abode of God.

If we do, we would be asking of ourselves and those in authority some persistent and troubling questions. We would be right there at all times with the poor and miserable in the misery of the *imijondolo* of Diepsloot and Cato Crest, and we would be marching for the overthrow of unjust regimes and systems. Yes, we would be saying that there must be something seriously wrong with our political and economic system when it produces more indigent and unemployed, or an economic system that makes the wealthy even more wealthy or the poor even poorer; or a

social system that creates the yawning gaps of inequality that we experience in South Africa today, or a society that does not seem to be touched to outrage about the suffering of so many for so long; or that appears to be indifferent to rampant corruption, that robs the poor of their livelihoods, or the young of a future. We have to ask how it could be that in this country, our country, the richest in this vast Continent, we are unable to educate our young or care for our sick, or protect the elderly from harm and violence, or the innocent die senseless deaths by crime and the state is unable to guarantee safety and security. It will happen, I submit, if we have lost that vision of heaven that keeps us firmly rooted in the soil of God.

What then, am I saying? I am saying that as a church we need to rediscover our sense of mission, to be less preoccupied with the game of numbers, or peddling influence in irrelevant paces, or to be as Welby puts it, “a church turned in on itself” over exercised by the politics of power, suppressing alternative viewpoints and lifestyles and cultures, and to be focused on self-preservation. We could well expect to influence the course of history “not by power, nor by might but by my word, says the Lord of hosts”. We need therefore to free the church from the Constantinian bondage, or from the gilded cage of privilege, and become not just a church of the poor, but also a poor church.

N Barney Pitsoyana GCOB  
RECTOR  
College of the Transfiguration Grahamstown  
Grahamstown, 2 November 2013.