

Although you have not seen him, you love him,  
and even though you do not see him now,  
you believed in him...  
1 Peter 1:9

I thought long and hard about what a preacher says to honour a life so well lived, to celebrate one who has given so much of himself for the sake of Christ, one whose faith was so deep and enduring that he was unshakeable, and one who loved the church of God almost to a sacrificial extent, and latterly a family that was a gift to him and added a dimension to his life that he perhaps himself never quite realized. Bishop David Russell was a many sided person. In a sense he took with both hands the surprises that God dished out to him from time to time. His was a life filled with thanksgiving and sacrifice, and eucharist can never be far off in describing him.

A chance meeting at St Peter's College, Alice in 1966 would never have signaled what an uproarious life it would be in years to come. Then recently ordained Fr David was in Alice with the late Fr (later Bishop) Siggibo Dwane. They were both to be curates at St Matthews, Keiskamahoe, and David Russell had wished to immerse himself in Xhosa lore culture and language. To a then young law student this was a strange combination and a curious prospect. Unbeknown to me it was an introduction that was to affect me very deeply. In the years that followed, as an undergraduate at Fort Hare, I had the privilege of being party to those Innisfree, Hogsback weekends that the late Fr Aelred Stubbs CR organized – long walks in the mountains, discussions around the fireplace, delightful meals and erudite company. That was a company that had included some of the Anglicans who were to play a very significant role in one's life. But, the challenging times lay ahead.

Fr David seemed somehow able to persuade the bishops to place him in situations that exercised his passion, stretched his imagination and tested his faith. No sooner was he established as an assistant priest in King William's Town under Fr James Gawe, yes by then fluent in isiXhosa, that the era of forced removals as a policy of the government to clear black communities from what would be declared white areas came into operation. Whole communities were taken from areas as far afield as Tzitzikama, Karroo, Thornhill and dumped in Dimbaza, among them were some of the recently released Robben Island political prisoners separated from their families and banished to Dimbaza. Fr David came to prominence during such challenging pastoral situations. He stood alongside the people, shared with them their grief, was outraged at such unimaginable cruelty and heartlessness. He saw daily the harshness of the conditions, and he knew that he couldn't possibly be

unmoved. Those days his response was to organize blankets, food, and various means of alleviating their plight. Yes, he took his stand on the steps of St George's Cathedral and underwent a prolonged fast to draw attention to this situation. Together with Fr Cos Desmond forced removals became a site for mission, and international attention was drawn on this yet another example of the senselessness of apartheid. After his fast, Fr David then resolved to live on R5 per month, the pension or grant that was paid by the state to those who had been dumped. He wrote letters to then Prime Minister patiently recording what it felt like to try the impossible – to live on R5 per month. It was, perhaps, an effort at appealing to the Christian conscience of the regime. It never worked. The policy was never reversed. It was made better to live in Dimbaza.

It was perhaps Steve Biko who caused Fr David to change direction. Steve was attracted to him because of his energy and dedication. But above all Steve admired his intellect. He found in him someone he could engage his own doubts, explore his own ideas and challenge his own perceptions about human nature. Steve was fascinated by David's lifestyle of voluntary poverty, simplicity of life and a celibate life. For Steve all this raised questions about God and about human nature. For Fr David, I believe that their discussions caused him to grow deeper into seeking and searching towards a contemplative life, and he tested his vocation to religious life. Steve challenged Fr David about a "liberal" approach to the social and political situations that were caused in the first instance by white power structure and a religious system that cannot escape culpability. For Steve Dimbaza was symptomatic of a very, deeply oppressive system for which the solution was not food parcels, or even prayer but a revolutionary overthrow of the system. For that the oppressed needed to be their own liberators.

Fr David transferred to Cape Town, and was appointed Chaplain to the Migrant Communities of the Western Cape. Here his approach changed somewhat. He was a leading figure in the demonstrations, in resisting the demolition of the shacks, in the destruction of the communities at the defiant settlement of Crossroads. He became a mediator in the wars and understood that the system was behind the phenomenon of the witdoeke. His identification with the struggles of the people was total. He spent much of his time in untiring efforts with the communities, risked his own life in the process, was teargassed, water-hosed, imprisoned, banned - and in every respect except being a white person, he shared the life and experiences of the oppressed.

Under a banning order he would, I am sure, have drawn on his own experience with Steve Biko in King William's Town. He had first hand knowledge of the harassment,

loneliness, anger and futility of it all. He was able to support the establishment of Steve Biko in KWT, especially that the church should make facilities available for the Black Community Programmes in 15 Leopold Street, Zanempilo, Njwaxa in new interventions in community development. He knew how important it was for Steve to have an intellectual source and to be surrounded by a community of friends and comrades. For David, he immersed himself in further studies and completed a PhD in Christian Ethics at UCT, and of course, he got married. Having been drawn to religious life for so long but never quite making it, it was no surprise that he got married to a woman in religious life, who deeply shared his faith activism.

One is struck by the fact that a life lived on a fast lane was founded on a profound faith in God. Such faith could never have been superficial or trite. It was a faith of daily living and nurturing. It was not a faith of material convenience, or honour or pride. It was faith, simpliciter! It was faith that was possible by being imaginative and thinking what God might have willed otherwise. It was a faith that trusted God as the ultimate arbiter in human affairs, and a faith that out of the love of Christ made it possible to love and to care beyond the imagination. What comes across so powerfully in Bishop David's life is that capacity to live by faith and to be trusting and dependent upon God. I have no doubt that there would have been many occasions when he rebuked God and despaired – but that would have been only to galvanise the energy necessary to take the struggle to the next level.

It is truly remarkable that one who was brought up in the life of privilege, though with a sense of justice that the Hamilton Russells would have bequeathed to him – actually, David said very little about that, seemed to be prepared, to commit class suicide (something, I suppose, that would be the envy of today's communists!), and live the life of activism by faith. In that respect he lived the life infused with the principles of the gospel. It was I think Francis of Assisi who said, "Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words..." It was not so much words that mattered but a life that spoke eloquently to one's faith. "Although you have not seen him, yet you love him..." speaks to a very deep and human predisposition that is the spirit in search for the God of all life. That search is by living, and that living is by loving, and loving is transformative. It seeks a root and branch upturning of the systems of oppression and make way for human flourishing.

Bishop David was a bishop of the church. I know that that surprised him to no end. He never believed that he was ever prepared for that. After all, he had managed to avoid being sucked into ecclesial structures. He was never an incumbent in a parish; never a church bureaucrat, and was comfortable serving under a succession of black rectors, and later as suffragan bishop to a black diocesan. He was very critical of the

dominant ease and pace with which the church took on what it believed. After all, he had vigorously opposed the church's involvement in the SADF, especially the provision of chaplains. He opposed conscription to the fight apartheid wars, and he delved deeply into the theology and ethics of the just war. In his own pastoral engagements that had led him to being banned by the apartheid regime, he would have been aware of support by the hierarchy of the church, but he knew that there were some deeply opposed to his activism.

As it turned out, and maybe because of his own doubts, he was a good bishop. He was good because he was an unconventional bishop. He sat rather lightly on episcopal authority and at times appeared to be embarrassed by it. He respected collective decisions and involved especially his Chapter in critical decisions. He continued, however, to challenge authorities especially about the new communities of the dispossessed and evicted farm dwellers in his diocese in the new South Africa. He led the diocese to turn over church land back to the communities or agricultural and human development. He empowered priests and supported them in their ministry, without being patronising. It is no wonder then that he was the first bishop to ordain women as soon as the measure was approved by Provincial Synod in 1992.

He is remembered at the College in Grahamstown as a caring and loving neighbour. He chaired the Executive Committee of Council, and he devoted a great deal of his time on College affairs. The last time I communicated with him was in November last year when he wrote to congratulate us on the accreditation for the BTh degree. He had a good theological mind, and he was always anxious that Anglican clergy receive good theological education and be steeped in Anglican formation and spirituality.

To my surprise he was one of those in the Synod of Bishops who championed what amounted to banning Anglican priests from belonging to political parties. I argued that I thought that was far too patronizing. In return I was told that that was necessary to shield clergy from political violence. It was a pastoral measure. It just seemed to me that there was no theological justification for such a draconian measure. We agreed to disagree.

The Letter of Peter continues the idea of faith that arises not out of intellectual knowledge or resort to the senses and feelings, yet that faith that is expressed most deeply in the sense of joy and confidence. "... (you) rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith..." It was appropriately with much joy that we welcomed the dawn of the new era in South Africa in 1994. It was very emotional to have Nelson Mandela walking out of jail that 11 February

1990; and we all felt that we were participating in a long walk towards freedom (that is an important difference, because freedom is never an event but a process!). It was joy that was not naïve enough to say that all matters had been resolved by the stroke of a pen. It was joy we all shared in even without knowing what lay ahead. It was, if you like, faith at work.

It strikes me that in Bishop David's life we had a confident and intelligent faith, faith that was not dependent on benefactors, except the knowledge of Christ and Christ crucified. It was neither apologetic nor ashamed, as if the faith we believed in was owed to others, beholden to the power elites. It is a faith, with whatever its shortcomings, that has brought us to where we are. I believe that if only the church were to be less apologetic in the new South Africa it would take its place at the heart of the life of this society and in the hearts of the people for good; to share and shape the fortunes of our communities, and join with others in taking our rightful place in shaping the caliber of our country. There is nothing to be ashamed of, certainly nothing that we have not corrected and confessed ourselves. Bishop David surely demonstrated by his life that the faith we have is expressive of the joy we are bound to share with others. If we do that we could make a difference in our country. We would make South Africans a proud and diligent people ready to change their own fortunes for the better. It is, after all, the outcome of our faith that we are truly and fully human.

We are gathered here then as a church and land, to give thanks and to celebrate a life lived in the love of Christ. We are witnesses to the faith, energy and faith-in-action that Bishop David always lived by. He was an example to us by being a faithful servant of God. He has left us a rich legacy of faith and love of all humanity.

To his family: Dorothea, Matthew and Andrew we pray for your comfort in bereavement. We trust that your "living hope" will carry you, and your love, his love, God's love, will enfold him in your arms as you have done in his last years of illness. To his sisters and extended family also we thank you. We thank you for having dedicated David to the church of God and to the cause for justice in our country at no mean cost. Thank you.

My brother David, my friend and mentor, thank you for your revolutionary faith. Go well. Go well, fly with the angels to the communion of the saints that have gone ahead of you. May the angels and the ancestors receive you with the chants of "Holy, holy, holy..." and Halleluias! May the spirits of ZK Matthews, Steve Biko, Fr Trevor Huddleston CR, Oliver Tambo, Fr Aelred Stubbs CR, Sister Josephine SPB greet you with the resounding song of praise, "Camagu!" Makube chosi! May your family in

heaven gather to look kindly on our shortcomings; have pity on us and forgive us. May the cloak of Elijah that gives Elisha the power of the prophet fill our hearts with the burning zeal to start anew, if needs be. Praise be to God, for this immeasurable gift.

Amen.

N Barney Pitsoa Tsebe  
St George's Cathedral  
Cape Town, 23 August 2014.