

Sunday 16th November 2014 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		33rd Sunday of the Year A Pentecost 23 Mission Sunday
Zeph 1:7, 14-18	Ps 90	1 Thess 5:1-11
		Matthew 25:14-30
BEING FAITHFUL TO GOD'S MISSION		

“But you, friends, are not in the dark; the day will not come upon you like a thief. You are all children of light, children of day.” (1 Thess 5:4-5)

The month of November is both a time of celebration, and a very demanding few weeks. On the side of celebration, there are end of year Christmas parties, holiday plans, the diocesan 160th anniversary service next Sunday, the 150 Jubilee Celebrations of the High Court here in Grahamstown, the following Friday.

The demands and stress are being found particularly amongst our students, and almost everyone at school writing final exams.

It’s also a time when we look back over the past year, and reflect on all that has marked our lives.

Judgement, the end of the world, the parable of the talents

Our scripture readings for this morning all pick up the theme of judgement, the day of the Lord, the coming of the Son of Man. There are a few underlying themes in these readings which we need to recognise.

The first underlying theme is that God does intervene, and judge, and call to account. This is a consistent OT theme, and we find it in the New Testament as well. Judgement happens as a punishment for sin; in the OT the judgement is often experienced in the form of natural disasters, or military defeat. Judgement in the NT is described more as something that will take place at the end of time, the end of the world.

That is the second underlying theme: that the world as we know it will come to an end. Perhaps it will be a natural disaster, or radical climate change, or a nuclear holocaust or some great disaster; it could also be a personal tragedy or event that changes our lives for ever. It could be our own death. The early disciples expected the end of the world and the return of Christ to happen in their life-times; as the centuries have gone by, Christians have had to redefine what the end of the world might mean.

The prophet Zephaniah: “The great day of the Lord is near.... That day is a day of wrath, a day of anguish and torment, a day of destruction and devastation...” (Zeph 1:14-15)

Paul, writing to the Thessalonian church: “... the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night. While they are saying, ‘All is peaceful, all secure,’ destruction is upon them... and there will be no escape.” (1 Thess 5:1-2)

Our Gospel reading is from a section of Matthew’s Gospel which speaks of the coming of the Son of Man. It is the parable of the talents, and the three servants, each given talents (“bags of gold” – REB) “according to his ability” (Mt 25:15). A talent was worth more than fifteen years’ wages of a labourer, and so represented enormous wealth. The bags of gold could also mean the gifts that God has given us, the talents and abilities we were born with, the responsibilities and opportunities that have come our way.

The servants are left in charge while the master goes away. The time comes when he returns and they are called to give account.

Two of the servants have done well. But the third servant is a sorry case. He buries the talent (the gold) he has been given, and when the time comes to give account, he produces that unused gift, and says, “I was afraid....” (25:25). The judgement is harsh: “Throw this worthless

slave into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (25:30).

It is a parable about God (the master) and Israel (the slaves). God had left Israel with talents to use: the law; the Temple; the blessings of the covenant to share with the world. But they had buried these talents in the ground, kept the light for themselves. They had been worthless slaves. God would reject them.

It’s a parable about our lives, you and me, how we are using all that we have been given. It starts by recognising what we have, how we have been blessed, our creativity, our skills and energy, our resources, our finances – and then reflecting on how we are using these gifts. How have we used our God-given gifts and talents during this past year?

It is a parable about us as the church, the people of God. What are we doing with the gifts that we have been given?

Mission Sunday

Today is known in the Anglican Communion as Mission Sunday. We are a few days away from St Andrew’s Day, 30th November, St Andrew being the patron saint of mission, because he brought his brother Peter to Jesus (Jn 1:40-42).

What is mission?

Mission is a word often used by organisations and companies and banks. People talk about “mission statements”, in which they try and define what they want to achieve. A clothing shop might have as its mission statement “To be the shop of choice for all South Africans.” For some of us, “mission” makes us think of week-long tent campaigns, or a church holding a mission – a series of special services and outreach to preach the gospel and draw others to Christ. Or we associate “mission” with “missionaries” – people who leave their

homes and families and travel to faraway countries, to preach the good news, the gospel of Jesus, to those who have not heard about Jesus Christ.

The word “mission” comes from the word that means “to be sent”. After the resurrection, Jesus said to his disciples, “As the Father sent me, so I send you.” (Jn 20:21).

To be part of the mission of God means to be sent by God. The mission of God embraces the whole of life.

Mission Sunday reminds us that we as the church are here not only for ourselves, but also for others; that as much as we celebrate our life together, and draw strength from all we do and are as a community of believers, we are called to look beyond ourselves. We are called to be a missionary church, called to follow the command of Jesus to “go into all the world, make disciples of all nations, baptising them... and teaching them...” (Matt 28:16-20).

We are called to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, who in his home town of Nazareth, stood up in the synagogue and read those great words from Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:18f.)

Jesus was sent by God to restore the world to himself through his life and death and resurrection: “God... reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” (2 Cor 5:18ff.)

Five Marks of Mission

As Anglican Christians, we have the Five Marks of Mission to guide us in our understanding of what the mission of God is, what we are called to do. We are called to tell, to teach, to tend, to transform, and to treasure.

To tell: to *proclaim* the Good News of the Kingdom;

To teach: to *teach, baptise and nurture* new believers;

To tend: to *respond to human need* by loving service;

To transform: to seek to *transform unjust structures* of society;

To treasure: to strive to *safeguard the integrity of creation* and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

When we are involved in any aspect of these five activities, then we are part of the mission of God.

When we look at the life and work and witness of the cathedral, and when we look around us in Grahamstown, we see so many signs of people involved in the mission of God. The Gospel is preached and proclaimed, through Sunday sermons, Bible studies, projects such as Spiritfest, our wonderful acts of choral worship. People are being taught and disciple in the Christian faith. There is an immense amount of care for those in need. We have a history of critical engagement with current issues, with calls for justice and change. Many are passionately involved in caring for creation. Let's not underestimate what is being done.

At the same time, let's not ignore the huge needs that are there. We are in a particularly fragile time, perhaps a turning point, in the life of our democracy, following the events in Parliament last Thursday evening. The acceptance by parliament of the report that exonerates the President from any responsibility for Nkandla is a disgrace, and the outrage from opposition parties that greeted this, is

understandable. We are living in a fool's paradise where those in power wish for the church to be uncritically loyal and supportive of whatever is being done. We cannot do this. Nkandla is a scandal and a symbol of the greed and corruption that mars our nation, and cannot be forgotten.

Let's continue in our life of worship, witness and service. Let's continue to teach and preach the truth of the Christian faith, not being misled by, e.g. "The Lost Gospel", with its rather sweet stories about Jesus and Mary Magdalene and their children – a lovely fairy story made popular by Dan Brown and *The Da Vinci Code*. The "lost gospel" is neither lost – the document has been around since the 6th century – nor is it a gospel.

Let's continue to be people of love and prayer, reaching out to one another, building a new community, the foretaste and sign of the kingdom of God. Let's be people who in our love for one another, in our courtesy, in our efforts to understand, are signs of the reconciliation that Christ came to bring. Let's be people who handle power wisely, with compassion, and in a spirit of service. Let's continue to be a community that cares for the poor, those on the margins. Let's be people who create beauty and who work for peace.

CONCLUSION

Father Almighty, we offer ourselves to you, as a living sacrifice, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Send us out into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory.