

Sunday 1st March 2015 Christ Church, Grahamstown 8.30 a.m.		2nd Sunday in Lent – Year B Ember Day Admission of Church Officers Licensing of a Lay Minister
Gen 17:1-7, 15 – 16	Ps 22:23-32	Romans 4:13-25
		Mark 8:31-38
Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me		

“Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must renounce self; he must take up his cross and follow me.” (Mk 9:34)

Greetings from the Cathedral family, and the archdeaconry of Grahamstown, to the incumbent, Fr Terry Mitchell, and Julia; Revd Gwen Mvula, deacon on placement here from St Augustine’s; our newly admitted churchwardens and church councillors; our newly licensed lay minister, Steve Birt, joining Mike Ginn; the Christ Church Trustees, with the chairperson, Advocate Nikkie Turner; our COTT students here today, with their families: I greet you all in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Thanks and appreciation

It is very good to be with you this morning, to license Steve, and to admit your church officers. It shows this wonderful combination of worship and good governance – two aspects of ministry that we need in the life of the church. Worship is central to all that we do and are, and we need to lead worship with reverence and dedication; good governance is essential to the health of any organisation, including the church.

Thank you, Terry, for your ministry and leadership here as incumbent, and for your work at the College of the Transfiguration, as you mentor the parish placement class for 2015.

Thank you, members of Christ Church, for your life and witness in this part of town, your support for the Nompumelelo pre-school, your

involvement with the Archdeaconry of Grahamstown – including your support for the archdeaconry fund; Glyn Armstrong with your administrative help and your presence at our archdeaconry meetings; your commitment as a congregation to be part of the life of the diocese, including our financial support and outreach to the diocese of Kahlamba; thank you to Sarah Gess for your work on the history of Christ Church. Happy birthday, Sarah, for later this week. And I am sure that you all had fun with your pancakes on Shrove Tuesday!

God's covenant with his people

Last Sunday we read of the covenant between God and Noah, following the Flood; next Sunday we shall hear of the covenant at Mount Sinai, and the giving of the Law, the Ten Commandments; today we have the covenant between God and Abraham.

A covenant is “a bond entered into voluntarily by two parties by which each pledges himself to do something for the other.”¹ We might speak of a marriage covenant, or a commercial contract; but it has a significant meaning for us as people of faith. It is used to describe the relationship between God and his people Israel, and it is central to the religion of the Old Testament.

The prophets continually called the people back to the God of the covenant, to be faithful to the covenant relationship; Jeremiah looked forward to the new covenant, in which the law would be written on our hearts (Jer 31:31); Hosea spoke of a better marriage (Hos 2:22); Isaiah spoke of the faithful servant (Is 42:18ff; 52:13ff).

The old covenant is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who inaugurated a new covenant – which we recall at every Eucharist: “this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mk 14:22-25)²

¹ *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 425

² *An Anglican Prayer Book*, 121

We are held, wonderfully, in this covenant relationship, this agreement, bond, pact, in which God has reached out to us, and embraces us, and invites us to discover new life as we respond.

Lent, wilderness, death, celebration

We are in the season of Lent, the 40 days, excluding Sundays, from Ash Wednesday until Easter Day. After Jesus had been baptised, “the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness...” (Mk 1:12f.). Lent is our wilderness time; or, as one writer put it, “Lent encompasses one of the periods allotted for *despair, mourning and alienation* in the calendar”³ of the church (my emphasis).

Lent says to us that the wilderness, the experience of drought, desolation, despair, struggle, temptation, surrounded by wild beasts – symbols of violence and evil – is part of the Christian experience – part of the covenant experience. We might think that we our lives should always be wonderful, happy, peaceful, successful – but Lent and the wilderness says that this is not the whole picture.

This is underlined for us in the Gospel reading, and those sobering words of Jesus: “Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must renounce self; he must take up his cross and follow me.” (Mk 9:34)

Self-denial – to renounce self - means no longer being defined by our clan or tribe or race or family, but to embrace a new understanding of identity – as followers of Christ we join a community of all who have taken that step. We become part of a new family consisting of all who follow Jesus as Lord.

To take up our cross and follow Jesus means to face death. We think of Christians in Iraq and Libya recently beheaded by ISIS; of Christians killed by Boko Haram in Nigeria; of Kayla Mueller, an

³ Helen Moffett, in *Awakening to Witness Lent Meditations 2015*, 34

American aid worker who was killed while a prisoner of ISIS, possibly during an air strike.

But it can mean another kind of death, a death to our own interests, and instead offering all that we are to God, for him to use us and direct us as he chooses. Allan Boesak put it like this. He said:

“[This] is not about dying. It is about living. But it’s about living a life that I have given up trying to control, keep, and safeguard. It means giving up my life the way I want it, or planned it. We want such a life: planned, safe, ordered, secure, peace with minimal risk. Jesus says, if we cling to that life we will lose it. If we are willing to lose it for his sake, we will find it...”⁴

Bonhoeffer, martyred under Hitler during World War Two, reflecting on the call of Christ to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow, wrote of the danger of cheap grace: cheap grace is “forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ...”⁵

I was privileged to attend the inauguration of the new Rhodes Vice-Chancellor, Dr Sizwe Mabizela, on Friday evening, as were some of you. It was a celebration of Grahamstown at its best, while acknowledging the huge challenges we face. It was also a wonderful tribute to Dr Mabizela, who we salute and congratulate; to Rhodes University, for making such a fine appointment; and to all who have a vision for a new community of hope and learning, that will benefit not only the students, but the wider community of Grahamstown.

It is not only at great celebrations that we catch a glimpse of Grahamstown at its best. Every time we gather for worship, we catch a glimpse of who we are. Whenever people stand up and are counted, as

⁴ Allan Boesak in *Awakening to Witness Lent Meditations 2015*, 41

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 45-49, referred to in *Word and Worship 2015*, 88

your new church officers have done today, we see a sign of the covenant relationship. When people choose to serve, to give time and resources and effort so that others may be helped or lifted up, we see the words of Jesus fulfilled: “whoever loses his life for my sake and for the gospel’s will save it.” (Mk 8:35)

CONCLUSION

May God bless us in our journey together.