

<b>Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> August 2015</b> <b>Cathedral, Grahamstown</b> <b>7.30 &amp; 9.30 a.m.</b> <b>7 p.m. Student Eucharist</b>		<b>19<sup>th</sup> Sunday – Year B – P11</b> <b>National Women’s Sunday</b> <b>Sunday after RU Silent Protest</b>	
2 Sam 18:5-9, 15, 31-33	Ps 130	Ephesians 4:25-5:2	
		John 6:35, 41-51	
<b>SILENT PROTEST – JUST THE BEGINNING</b>			

“The king was deeply moved and went up to the roof-chamber over the gate and wept, crying out as he went, ‘O, my son! Absalom my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son.’ ” (2 Sam 18:33)

The newspaper headlines all summed it up: Rebellion crushed. Rebels get what they deserve. Rebellious son slaughtered while royal father weeps. The nation is saved. Forest swallows victims. Or, to quote the Sub Dean: #Absalommeetshismatch #Longhairisnotagoodidea #afighttothedeath

The story of the death of Absalom marks the end of a terrible time in the history of Israel. Absalom, once described as the most handsome man in all Israel, with immensely long and heavy hair (2 Sam 14:25-26) – has rebelled against his father King David. For a while, he holds the power while David flees for his life.

But then the tide turns, and Absalom is being pursued by his father’s troops. He is riding his horse through the forest and gets his head caught – all that long hair - in the branches of a tree; the horse gallops on and he is left hanging. It is there, helpless, that his father’s soldiers find him. In spite of King David’s order to be merciful, the troops kill Absalom. The news reaches King David, who breaks down and weeps, “Absalom, my son, my son, would that I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam 18:33) The rebellion is crushed, David is restored to his throne, all – it would appear – is at peace once more.

## The death of Absalom

Today is National Women's Day; we are in Women's Month; August in our church is known as the Month of Compassion; this past Friday the Cathedral hosted the annual Breaking the Silence – the culmination of the day of Silent Protest against gender violence, one of the most gruelling and difficult events that we as the Cathedral experience, and which we have hosted for the past number of years.

But I want to return to the death of Absalom, from our first reading. At first glance it seems as if he got what he deserved. He was the son of king David; he had murdered his own half-brother Amnon; he had nevertheless been allowed to return home in peace by his father King David. But – the ungrateful wretch – he had then risen up in rebellion against the king, and nearly taken the throne – well, didn't he get what he deserved? Wasn't he asking for it? Surely he deserved to die!

But a birds-eye view of the seeds of Absalom's rebellion takes us back to the rape of Tamar his sister (2 Samuel 13), by Amnon his half-brother – a story in itself – and the growing hatred that Absalom had for Amnon as a result. Eventually Absalom invites Amnon to his home, makes him drunk, has him killed, and then flees for his life. The family is torn apart by Amnon's behaviour in raping his half-sister Tamar, and by Absalom's revenge.

But there is another sequel, another aspect to the rape of Tamar, and that is the inaction of David, the king and the father, who was angry, but did nothing to protect his daughter, did nothing to deal with his son Amnon “because he was his eldest son and he loved him.” (2 Sam 13:22)

And what sort of example was David to his own family? A few chapters earlier, we find David going his own way with Bathsheba, wife of Uriah; in an effort to cover up his affair with Bathsheba, David has Uriah killed, and then takes Bathsheba as his wife. God through the prophet Nathan pronounces judgement: “This is the word of the

Lord: I shall bring trouble on you from within your own family. I shall take your wives and give them to another man before your eyes, and he will lie with them in broad daylight. What you did was done in secret; but I shall do this in broad daylight for all Israel to see.” (2 Sam 12:12)

Why are we given these stories of the life of David? What purpose do they serve? We are given them to realise our own fallibility; to see the weakness that is in each one of us; perhaps to reflect on the consequences of our actions; we are given these stories to realise that “pride comes before a fall”, that the most powerful amongst us is not immune to corruption and the abuse of power; we are given these terrible stories to preserve, in the midst of our sacred texts, these accounts of terror, of horror, these stories of the abuse of women, these accounts of the abuse of power – so that the seeds for transformation are there for us to find and to nurture – so that we may challenge and question the complacency and the complicity of hierarchy and power and control.

The death of Absalom marked the end to a civil war, a deadly conflict within the community of faith. The ripple effects and consequences of Amnon’s rape of Tamar, and David’s behaviour with Bathsheba, resulted in the deaths of thousands of people, and nearly led to the downfall of the kingdom. All this within the community of faith.

Indeed, king David wept on hearing the news of the death of Absalom. If only he had wept – and acted - at the rape of his daughter Tamar; if only he had wept – and repented - over the heartbreak and destruction caused by his own family; if only he had wept over the death of Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, whose death he had arranged. If only he had wept then.

The death of Absalom is the story of a single death. But it represents the heartbreak and destruction that human sin causes. It represents the end of a dream. It represents a broken and divided community of faith; perhaps it represents a crippled, broken, powerless church.

## Silent Protest

And today the death of Absalom represents for us the devastation of gender violence, the agony and heartbreak and suffering caused by rape and abuse.

This past Friday was the occasion for the annual Silent Protest, the mass protest action in the fight against sexual violence, organised by Rhodes University. The Silent Protest first began here in 2007, with 80 young women taking part. Last year, 2014, 1700 Rhodes students participated in Grahamstown, and there were protests in Johannesburg and Durban on and around the same day. This past Friday, for the first time, the event was opened to members of the wider community, and 1500 Rhodes student were joined by about 500 people from the Grahamstown community.

What happens at the Silent Protest? What happened on Friday?

The protesters gathered before dawn on Friday morning and affirmed their commitment to justice and to an end to rape and sexual violence. Many then had their mouths taped up for the rest of the day – fasting; no water, no food, no talking – to represent the silence of many rape survivors who never get to speak up or report the rape, for fear of stigma, or fear of further attack, or fear of being blamed, or the fear that they will not be believed.

As has happened in previous years, a number of rape survivors also chose to wear t-shirts saying “Rape Survivor” – as part of their determination not to be silenced, not to be destroyed, by what they have gone through; and to speak out against the stigma and victimisation of rape and sexual violence.

All the protestors went about their normal daily routines – at work, at lectures, in town – wearing their t-shirts, many of them taped up. At the very least, they caught people’s attention.

I salute them for their courage.

In the afternoon, the protestors then gathered at Drostdy Arch, and marched in silence down to the Cathedral. Here they were allowed to remove the tapes and break their fast; and then began what each year is an utterly terrible time as people, rape survivors, then choose to tell their stories. Each year I sit here and listen, and my heart breaks.

The stories of the rape survivors challenge all the stereo-types that are around, of rape. They were not asking for it; they did not deserve it; they were not dressed inappropriately. Rape survivors are black, white, young, old, rich, poor, educated, illiterate, mostly women or girls – some grannies, some tiny children; some men or boys. The rapists are uncles, brothers, cousins, friends, colleagues, boy-friends, schoolmates, step-fathers, neighbours, community figures, people in authority; only sometimes are the rapists strangers.

I realised again the extent to which we are living in a rape culture; where it is ok, apparently, for a boy to rape a girl, a man to rape a woman; for gang rapes; or for rape to be used as a weapon of war. The manne, the boytjies, the boeties, the brekers, the main ous, those who see it as their right to dominate, to control, to abuse, to insult, to degrade, to rape.

## **What are we to do?**

The death of Absalom was the end of one struggle and the beginning of another: the struggle, the journey, to pick up the pieces, to rebuild the broken community. How do we pick up the pieces, the devastation, caused by rape and violence and abuse? What are we to do? How do we change the culture, the mind-set, the attitudes especially amongst our boys and men about gender, power, sex, control?

So often the response is one of powerlessness, we shrug our shoulders. But I think there are many things we can in fact do, many ways in which to pick up the pieces.

**Create safe spaces** to talk and to break the silence, to support the victims, to ask the difficult questions, to challenge behaviour and stereotypes, as RU has done with the Silent Protest. I hope that the Cathedral is such a safe space.

At my welcome to the Silent Protest here in the Cathedral each year, I say to those gathered, welcome to this sacred space; this place of prayer and worship, this place where we are real, where we face pain and betrayal and heartache; a place where all are welcome; a place for healing and hope, a place where we are enfolded and embraced by love and the strength of others.

**Raise our sons and our daughters to be different**, not to go with the crowd, but instead to be people who respect one another, who protect the weak, who stand up for what is right.

**Challenge our theology.** What is it about the way people understand their faith that they use sacred texts – scriptures – to justify abuse and violence? What is it that enables people to be oppressed, silenced, marginalised, in the name of a religion, in the name of God? One person wrote: “Why in modern societies do men still fight their battles for dominance over the bodies of women, be it in the private or public sphere? These battles for dominance are responsible for untold violence in our society as a whole. Is it not time that men began to honour, respect and worship the whole of God, both male and female?”<sup>1</sup>

**Reclaim Gospel values** – from our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading: values of respect, love: no more falsehood; speak the truth; be angry but do not sin; no more offensive talk, but only what is good and helpful – no crude

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<sup>1</sup> *Word and Worship 2014 – 2015*, pg 223

sexist jokes, no degrading language; be generous, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, live in love, be like Christ (Eph 4:25-5:2)

**Weep and grieve, don't walk away.** As David wept over his son Absalom, let us weep and grieve at the devastation that is caused on a daily basis; let us never become hardened or complacent, let us never turn our backs or forget or ignore what is happening.

## CONCLUSION

Margaret Mead said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Words of quiet lament – our psalm today:

“Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice.  
O let your ears consider well: the voice of my supplication.

If you Lord should note what we do wrong: who then O Lord could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you: so that you shall be feared.

I wait for the Lord my soul waits for him: and in his word is my hope.

My soul looks for the Lord: more than watchmen for the morning,  
more I say than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel trust in the Lord for with the Lord there is mercy: and with him is ample redemption.

He will redeem Israel: from the multitude of his sins.”

(Psalm 130)

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