

Sunday 25th October 2015 Grahamstown Cathedral 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		BIBLE SUNDAY REFORMATION SUNDAY 22nd Sunday after Pentecost	
Job 42:1-6, 10-17	Ps 34:1-8	Heb 7:23-28	
		Mark 10:46-52	
I want my sight back			

“Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ ‘Rabbi,’ the blind man answered, ‘I want my sight back.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has healed you.’ And at once he recovered his sight and followed Jesus on the road.” (Mark 10:51-52)

Bible Sunday

Today is known as Bible Sunday, when we give thanks for the gift of the Bible, the Holy Scriptures, and we reflect on the significance of the Bible in our worship. The Collect for today says a great deal about the place of the Bible in the life of the church, and in our own journey of faith: “Blessed Lord, you gave us the Scriptures to point the way to salvation: *teach us to hear them, read them and study them with love and prayer*, and strengthen us by their inspiration to hold firm the hope of eternal life...”

I love the SAPB version of the Collect, which we find on the 2nd Sunday in Advent: “Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise *hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them*, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life...”¹

The scriptures have been described as being safe enough for a child to wade in, and deep enough for an elephant to swim in. We read them to encounter and see the living Word, Jesus Christ – just as the blind beggar Bartimaeus did in our Gospel reading; we are strengthened by the spiritual food we receive; we are taught and we grow in our

¹ *A Book of Common Prayer – CPSA 1954 (rev. ed. 1982), pg 55*

knowledge and understanding of God and God's ways. St Jerome, a Church father and teacher who lived in the 5th century, wrote that "ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ."

We are encouraged to read the Bible regularly, prayerfully, as part of our journey with Jesus.

A central part of our regular worship here at the Cathedral, is to hear the scriptures read and proclaimed; we are given this wonderful meal of readings to contemplate on, to feed us, to nurture our souls, to guide us, at times to provoke us, to shape our thinking and to enrich our understanding.

For me personally, and for all who preach, it is a very real privilege to open the scriptures, to savour them, and to share the word of God. I come to sermon preparation with trepidation and excitement.

It is never merely an academic exercise of study and reading: there is always the dimension of what the Spirit of God is saying to the church. That is why there is a very important statement at the end of our first two scripture readings each Sunday: "Hear the word of the Lord." As the scripture is read, as we listen, what is the word of the Lord for us, today, now?

Our readings

As always during the Green season, the Sundays after Pentecost, our scripture readings today are part of a series, following on from last week.

Job 42:1-6, 10-17 is our final reading from the Book of Job, the exploration of suffering and heartbreak and devastation from a place of faith – the experience of so many of us, with our daily lived reality, and the questions we ask, our struggles to continue to be people of compassion and love and trust.

The verses we read are Job's final response, as he sees the wonder and majesty of God, and concludes, "...now I see you with my own eyes. Therefore I yield, repenting in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5b-6) And from then on, his life is fulfilled and complete. His family and friends come to support him; more children are born to him; his daughters – the most beautiful girls in the world, we read - are given an inheritance with their brothers, which was unusual; and even more unusually, we are told their names – we have this glimmer of gender equality and recognition. After all the misery and heartache, Job finally finds peace.

Job reminds us that there is no easy answer or solution to the suffering and distress that we experience, that we see around us – the pain of this past week, the greed and the fear that terrorised the community, the brutal attacks on foreigners, the terrible attacks on some households in Joza of a few weeks back, including rape and sodomy; the frustration and rage and despair that exploded on our campuses, and continues to simmer.

With Job, we continue to look to God for strength and courage and a way forward. By the end of his time of great suffering, Job is able to see something of the wonder and glory of God. From today's psalm: "O taste and see that the Lord is good: happy the man/woman who hides in him!" (Ps 34:8). We are invited to taste and see that the Lord is good.

In our Gospel reading, **Mark 10:46-52**, the blind beggar Bartimaeus has his sight restored, he sees Jesus, and follows him on the road. He has two prayers, two requests to Jesus. The first is his call for help, "Son of David, have pity, have mercy on me",² a call and a prayer which has become part of our longing and our asking that Jesus would look on us and give us strength, what is known as the "Jesus prayer": "Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner" – a constant refrain, almost a prayer without words, that we can pray at any time, perhaps especially in moments of crisis. I was

² Cf. also the prayer of the tax collector in the parable (Luke 18:13), and the prayer of the thief on the cross: "Jesus, remember me..." (Lk 23:42)

praying it as I stood with students this week; I have prayed it often in times of despair. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.

The second prayer of Bartimaeus is in response to the Lord's question: "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus responds, "I want my sight back." "I want to see again." It is a prayer, a moment of salvation, moving from darkness to light, from oppression of sin and evil into liberty and hope and new life. "I want to see." And that is our prayer also. I want to see. I want to understand. In all that we are facing, help me to see the way forward. Help me to see the wonder and truth of God. Help me to see where I need to be, what I should do. Help me to see.

#feesmustfall; xenophobia

These have been very difficult days. The student protests and the #feesmustfall campaign, and the xenophobic attacks here in Grahamstown, have shaken us all. Things have been and are very fragile. Claire and I have a daughter at Stellenbosch, and another writing matric and heading for university next year. Here in our Cathedral, amongst us this morning, we have students, academics, admin and support staff, from Rhodes University and East Cape Midlands – and from all over southern Africa, because the Cathedral is a place of welcome and worship for people from everyone.

Relieved as we are by the announcement on Friday that there will be 0% increase in university fees for 2016, there is the immediate question as to where the shortfall will come from; the concerns that if this is not adequately addressed, universities will be less and less able to maintain standards of academic excellence, research and development – as well as the impact on staff salaries. And looming behind all this is the call for free tertiary education.

It has been a relief to see that acts of violence and vandalism have been the work of a small minority – Rhodes is the only university which has not had violence on campus; it has been so good to see that most students have consistently remained peaceful and disciplined –

well done. It has been good to see that attempts by some to humiliate and disrespect the Vice-Chancellor and senior university management have been rejected by the majority of students; also that attempts to cause racial division have been resisted. There have been concerns about intimidation of those who haven't gone along with the protests. We don't always acknowledge the right to disagree, the right to freedom of speech.

As I have moved around, I have seen Cathedral people, students and adults, everywhere. There has been a Christian presence and positive participation at so many levels: students, academic staff, Rhodes leadership, SAPS, in the marches, among those arrested in Cape Town - including Archbishop Thabo's son; at the meetings about the xenophobic attacks.

We are not out of the woods. Grahamstown is simmering. Let's remind ourselves of the Great Commandment: to love our neighbour as we love ourselves – and our neighbours are whoever they may be, of whatever race, language, nation, including the foreigners amongst us. It is wrong to loot and steal and destroy, it is wrong to attack and harass and intimidate. Let's help and make a difference where we can.

We have a breathing space to address the fees issue, as parents to be there for our children, with the goal that all young people of our country should have access to good education and opportunity. We need to take seriously the financial challenges that the majority of our young people face, and the frustration and simmering anger, the feeling that not enough has changed since 1994.

At the same time, I appeal to us all, especially our students, that we end this year on a good note, that exams are written without disruption, and that we allow the authorities – universities and government – the space to come forward with a workable solution. It would be counter-productive if there is further disruption, or if each year we face this kind of confrontation.

CONCLUSION

I commend to you the statements by Archbishop Thabo, made during this past week, which are on the ACSA website³ and his blog.⁴

Let's continue to pray for all involved; for foreigners displaced during this past week; for students, staff; for the Vice-Chancellors; for national government; for the SAPS; for matrics as they write exams; for the exams that lie ahead.

Let's remember that these days, these struggles, these times of danger and fear, are a journey that we walk with Christ, and we walk with one another, our brothers and sisters. We pray and ask with Bartimaeus, "Lord, I want my sight. Help me to see." And with Bartimaeus and one another and you and me, hand in hand together, with eyes wide open, we follow Jesus on the road.

From our gradual hymn this morning:

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "I am this dark world's light;
Look unto me, thy morn shall rise, and all thy day be bright."
I looked to Jesus, and I found in Him my Star, my Sun;
And in that light of life I'll walk, till travelling days are done.⁵

Amen.

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³ anglicanchurchsa.org

⁴ <http://archbishop.anglicanchurchsa.org/>

⁵ *Songs of Fellowship*, 216 v 3