

<b>Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> November 2015</b> <b>Grahamstown Cathedral</b> <b>7.30 &amp; 9.30 a.m.</b>		<b>MISSION SUNDAY</b> <b>25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost</b>
1 Samuel 1:4-20	1 Samuel 2:1-10	Hebrews 10:11-15, 19-25
		Mark 13:1-8

“Next morning they were up early and, after prostrating themselves before the Lord, returned to their home in Ramah. Elkanah had intercourse with his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her; she conceived, and in due time bore a son, whom she named Samuel, ‘because,’ she said, ‘I asked the Lord for him’.” (1 Sam 1:19-20)

### **A prayer for France**

Most of us by now would have heard the dreadful news of the terror attacks that took place on Friday evening (13<sup>th</sup> November) in Paris, France. There are at least 153 deaths, and over 200 injured, caused by suicide bombers and machine gun fire. Our prayers and love are with the families of all who have died; with the injured, with the people of France; with their leaders. To anyone here in the Cathedral, or in Grahamstown, with close ties to France, or who has been personally affected by what has happened in Paris, our deepest sympathies, our love and prayers in particular are with you. We weep and lament with you.

This evening, at Evening Prayer, we shall have a special focus on France, and we shall be praying for all involved (with a guest speaker, Miss Carole Vicent, who is from France). Please come. At the start of our service earlier, we prayed for all who have died. But I do want to lead us now in a Prayer for Paris.

Compassionate God and Father of all,  
 We are horrified by violence  
 In so many parts of the world.  
 It seems that none are safe,  
 And many are terrified.

We pray for the people of France in their loss and grief and outrage.

Hold back the hands that kill and maim;  
Turn around the hearts that hate.  
Grant instead your strong Spirit of Peace –  
Peace that passes our understanding  
But changes lives,  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

## Canon Nancy Charton

I want to pay a very warm and sincere tribute to the late Revd Canon Professor Nancy Charton, who died this past week (10<sup>th</sup> Nov) in Graaff-Reinet, at the age of 95. Nancy was among the first three women priests to be ordained in our Province, and it all happened here in Grahamstown, in this Cathedral, in September 1992. History was made here amongst us, in the life of this quite remarkable person, a mentor and icon to many, a faithful pastor and priest.

In her academic life, she worked at the University of Natal, and then moved here to Grahamstown, as lecturer and then as professor in the department of political studies at Rhodes University. She was made deacon upon retirement, and placed in charge, as a deacon, at St Bart's - and then, eight years later, in 1992, was ordained priest, within a few weeks of the church resolving to ordain women.

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba spoke of her as a “pioneering woman, whose whole life was committed to serving God through his people.”<sup>2</sup>

We as the Cathedral were greatly privileged to have Nancy as our preacher, in September 2012, to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the

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<sup>1</sup> Church of England website, *Prayers for peace & all those affected by violence* (amended). Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> November 2015

<sup>2</sup> Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, *Tribute to a pioneering priest – the Revd Canon Nancy Charton – 1920 – 2015*. Posted 11 November 2015

ordination of women to the priesthood. In her sermon, she spoke of her journey into ordination. She said – and her words are very significant -

“... looking back I can now see that my calling began in early childhood and I certainly never comprehended it as such. In the late 1950s [when she was approaching her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday] in the wake of a serious depression and its miraculous healing I gave my life to Christ and He did the rest. He, in and with the Church opened the doors and I walked through. But morning by morning I knelt here at the altar in the Lady Chapel praying, ‘Lord, here am I, fairly useless I know, but please use me in your Kingdom.’ And he did over a period of thirty years or more.”

And she went on to reflect on how the church – our church, the Anglican Church – in its journey towards the ordination of women, had to grapple with what the Spirit was saying to the church, the uncomfortable challenge of new wine being poured into old wineskins, the demands of the Holy Spirit in our changing circumstances.

I had not met Nancy before that day. And it fascinated me that at the age of 92, she was shaking us up, calling us to listen, reminding us of the journey we have walked from being a “colonial hierarchical structure” (her phrase) to being something different – more embracing, more inclusive. We have a way to go. And she spoke of the challenges around sexuality and sexual orientation, around the issue of global warming and climate change, the growing gap between rich and poor, the issues of poverty and inequality.<sup>3</sup> Her words were prophetic then and they remain prophetic now.

Today as the Cathedral, together with our diocese and with people all over southern Africa, we give thanks for her remarkable life and witness.

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Charton, *Sermon preached to celebrate twenty years of the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood*. September 2012. Accessed from the Cathedral website.

## Our readings

As always, the scripture readings that we have heard give life for the soul and food for thought. But they also shake us up – the Spirit at work, speaking to us, moving in us, disturbing us. The story of the birth of Samuel is the Old Testament parallel with the birth of Jesus Christ. And instead of the psalm, we read the prayer of Samuel’s mother, Hannah – and I wonder if you noticed how similar it was to the Magnificat, the prayer of Mary the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, her great cry of triumph and wonder and praise that we find in Luke’s gospel.

Both Hannah and Mary begin by exalting the Lord, rejoicing because he has saved them. They both sing of God who brings low and raises up, who “lifts the weak out of the dust and raises the poor from the refuse heap to give them a place among the great...” (1 Sam 2:8). In the more familiar words of the Magnificat: “he has brought down monarchs from their thrones, and raised on high the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:52-53)

Both Samuel and Jesus were of miraculous birth: Hannah who could not have children; Mary who was a virgin. For Hannah, the birth of Samuel was an answer to her prayer; for Mary, the birth of Jesus was the result of her words to the angel Gabriel, “I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38). The birth of Samuel was the unexpected, the impossible. His birth was a gift to Hannah and was God’s answer to her prayer. But his life transformed the entire nation. God answered her prayer and gave her this great gift, not only for her, but for everyone.

The birth of Samuel gives us a picture of God who turns things upside down, a “God of surprises”, God who invites us to expect the unexpected, God who invites us to pray and trust for a miracle, to find food and water in the wilderness, manna from heaven, God who invites us into a place of life and hope in the midst of heartache and desolation.

Because the birth of Samuel came at a time of unbelief and doubt, a time when the spiritual life of the nation was at a very low ebb. Eli was the priest at Shiloh; his sons were scoundrels “with little regard for the Lord” (1 Sam 2:12) and who abused their position of privilege as priests in the temple. It is no wonder, sadly, that “in those days the word of the Lord was very rarely heard, and there was no outpouring of vision.” (1 Sam 3:1). There was something rotten at the heart of the temple, the place of worship, the core of the nation.

Things got worse. A few years later, in a great battle between the Israelites and the Philistines, the Israelite army took the ark of God onto the battlefield. They were defeated, the ark was captured and Eli’s sons were killed in battle; Eli heard the news and died of a heart attack. The nation was in ruins.

Samuel’s birth and life gradually changed all that. His call from God was firstly to him, but through him God called the nation back to a life of faith and obedience.

But it began with the prayer of his mother, her longing for a child.

## **We long for a miracle**

I wonder if you, like me, have ever longed for a miracle. I wonder if, like me, you have ever prayed, and asked – and wondered whether God hears you, or is concerned about you, or whether God is even listening. I have longed for miracles. I struggle with this story. I long for a miracle. I think of people who have longed and asked and prayed for a child; or of prayers prayed when a loved one is desperately ill with cancer – how we long for a miracle. For the renewal and life of our Cathedral, for the whole church – how we continue to pray, and long for a miracle.

When our world is ripped apart – the lives lost, destroyed, in Friday night’s terror attack in Paris, or in the violent, brutal deaths in Joza, the tragedy of those who died in the bus fire on the N3, also on Friday,

and we are overwhelmed with grief and consumed with anger at those responsible – how we cry out, how we long for a miracle.

And yet again and again, when I look around, I see miracles. Signs of the kingdom. I open a letter from a colleague, and he tells me how our ministers fraternal are engaging with people following the xenophobic attacks, seeking unity and peace in our community. I scroll down my email and I see the invitation to the AGM of the Assumption Development Centre, and its wonderful work in Joza, co-ordinated by David Greybe. I read Nancy Charton's sermon at the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her ordination, and think of her thirty years of life of seeing how God used her for his kingdom. I read the letter from Mary Ellen Ashcroft, which is in our pew leaflet this morning, and think of how she witnessed a miracle in her son's healing, and in the love and support of so many. I walk outside the deanery and hear the cheerful screams and shrieks coming from Good Shepherd School, in Huntley Street, and I think of the teachers there, and the work they are doing, and the life and energy of that school in recent years. Miracles are all around us.

But I want more. Perhaps I am greedy. But I long for miracles – and perhaps you do also. I long to see healing and restoration, the hungry fed, the poor lifted up, my life and yours in a place of peace, the Cathedral a community of love and hope and joy and light, our country no longer at war with itself, our world in all its diversity able to live together in peace. I long for these miracles.

And they start, they are made possible, I believe, when we begin to ask – like Hannah the mother of Samuel, like Canon Nancy Charton, kneeling here in prayer all those years ago – because we then place ourselves where God can use us. Our crises drive us from self-sufficiency into faith. We are driven into faith.

And so we do this. We pray with Hannah, that empty lives, fruitlessness, would be changed into joy and hope. We pray with Nancy, that God would use us in his kingdom. We continue to pray with the people of the diocese of Umzimvubu, that God will bring

new life out of the ashes of destruction. We pray for France. We ask for a miracle.

## **CONCLUSION**

We pray with Hannah: Lord of hosts, do not forget me, but grant me offspring – fill my emptiness, meet me in my deepest need, come to me in my distress, hear my cry.

We pray with Nancy: Lord, here am I. Please use me in your kingdom.

We pray with Mary: Let it be to me according to your word.

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