

Theological Education Sunday

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Claire Nye Hunter, 21 August 2016

Scriptures: Jer 1:4-10 & Luke 13:10-17

Introduction

Theological education Sunday. Pray for COTT – staff and ordinands, invited to make a financial contribution...

Those who are seeking ordination, need to be:

- 1) Sure of their calling (Bishop asks 'Do you believe you are called by God..?')
- 2) Suitably theologically trained/educated

Bearing these 2 issues in mind, let us turn to our scripture readings today.

The call of Jeremiah – my story

Have you ever had the experience when you read a passage of scripture, and somehow the words jump out at you in a profound way, and you feel as if they were meant just for you?

That was my experience when I read these very verses from Jeremiah 1:4-10, for the very first time way back in 1977. Allow me to share with you how God used this passage to speak to the depths of my being and change the course of my life for ever.

I was 17 years old, alone in my room at home. I was overcome with a strong urge to open my Bible, and my eyes fell on this passage – the call of Jeremiah.

I read: *The Lord said to me "I chose you before I gave you life. Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart..."*

My heart began to beat heavily in me. Why? This triggered a memory of something I had been told that happened in my family before I was born. Let me explain.

Early 1960. Pretoria. Apartheid South Africa. A law was passed that all Black people had to carry a 'dompass' with them at all times. At Sharpeville, there was a large protest against this with people publically burning their pass books. The police opened fire – many were killed. The country was thrown into chaos – a state of emergency was declared.

A British priest, serving at the "Native Inland Mission", went to be alongside his parishioners and the community. He was arrested, detained without trial, and kept in solitary confinement for 3 months. His young Swiss wife was all alone with their 2 small boys, and was pregnant with the 3rd. A religious nun, Mother Joan (CSMV) came to his wife and said: "I know that many people are praying for your husband in prison, but I want you to know that I am praying specifically for your unborn child". He was released with the general amnesty on 31st May, and a few months later their premature little baby was born. They named her - Claire.

So imagine me reading these words, *'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart...'*

With a pounding heart, I remember running outside into the night. It seemed as if God was actually speaking to me! I wrestled with God, and remember calling out aloud, "But Lord, I am too young" (17 yrs old).

I read further, vs 7: *But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say that you are too young...You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you'*

Now I was really terrified. My heart beat so fast I thought it would leave my body.

I blurted out, "But Lord, I have a LISP, I can't speak properly".

Vs 9 :Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my lips and said to me "Listen, I have put my words in your mouth..."

I don't know how long this went on for, and don't ask me how – but by the end of that incredible encounter with God, speaking to the depths of my being through the words in the book of Jeremiah, I knew that somehow God was calling me to follow in my father's footsteps and one day serve him in the ordained ministry of the church.

BUT...

This was 1977. I was a teenager. I was a GIRL. I belonged to a church denomination that did not believe in the ordination of women (in fact, girls were neither servers nor Layministers either).

So what did all this mean? Had I completely misunderstood and misinterpreted the word of God?

So for years, I told no-one.

That was the start of a 17 year long journey of discernment, (during which time I qualified as a Social Worker, served as a youth pastor, student chaplain, pastoral assistant...I pursued Biblical and Theological studies at UCT and in the USA) until after many years of debate, deliberation, grappling with the scriptures (including arguments such as because Jesus was male, and his disciples were male, priests needed to be male..) our Provincial Synod in September 1992 passed the motion allowing women to be ordained, with a clear 2/3 majority vote.

So it was, that having first believed I had heard God's call to me as a 17 year old, 17 years later at the age of 34years the church confirmed and recognised this call, and I was welcomed into the ordained ministry of the church – first as a deacon and 9 months later as a priest. I thank God for the immense joy and privilege of serving God and his people in this ministry.

I first heard God's call to ordination through my reading of these verses in Jeremiah (which doesn't mean that everyone who reads this passage will hear and understand it in the same way). We know that God, through his Holy Spirit, can take the written word and make it become for us a living word that speaks to our hearts and lives. I am sure many of you have experienced this in your own lives, in different ways.

Now you might well ask: "If God can speak to each one of us through the scriptures (as he did to me as a young 17 year old), why then does anyone need Theological Education or training in order to interpret the Bible? Don't we just need to be open to listen to God? Isn't it simply a case of "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that's all there is to it?"

The importance of Theological Education – Luke 13:10-17

In attempting to answer this question, I turn now to our Gospel reading for today.

This is a very touching, deeply moving account of Jesus healing a woman who had been bent over, crippled, for 18 years. We can marvel at the depth of his compassion, in the way he fearlessly broke cultural and religious norms of the day by touching her (A Rabbi was forbidden to touch a woman) and healing on the Sabbath (breaking the law prohibiting work on the Sabbath). We can put ourselves in her

shoes and allow ourselves to experience God's amazing love, affirmation and healing (especially relevant when we are in National Women's month). For Jesus, people are more important than rules.

However, today I dare to suggest that it is also possible to consider this story symbolically. What do I mean?

I dare to suggest, that there is BAD theology out there, that keeps people bent, crippled, weighed down, oppressed (like the woman); whereas GOOD theology sets people free to stand up tall, and be the people that God created them to be (the healing words of Jesus).

Some scriptures, we know, as easy to read and clear to understand and apply to our lives. But it is not always so simple. There is what I call bad theology, dangerous theology, that arises when we take choice verses (often out of context) and apply them literally – using them to declare that God is saying things that are inconsistent with his very nature and being. Let me give you some examples to explain what I mean:

1) Women

A literal reading of scripture (especially Paul's letters) has over the centuries been used to oppress, marginalise and silence women; bar them from exercising leadership or ministry in the church ; make them feel like 2nd class citizens (in many countries they didn't even have the vote until as recently as 1971). Verses such as "Women be silent", "Women may not teach or have authority over men" "Women must cover their heads". A literal reading totally ignores all principles of Biblical and hermeneutical interpretation – including giving consideration to Genre (type of literature), insights from the cultural, religious, social context; and broader literary context in which the verses are contained etc. Verses such as "Women submit" "Women must obey their husbands" have allowed men to get away with, even justify, domestic violence and abuse ('I am the head of the house, she must do as I say'). Is this really what God is saying? No- this is BAD theology. It contradicts what we read elsewhere in scripture, eg "In Christ there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female for we are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Gal 3:28) and deprives women of their value as precious and beloved daughters of the living God. It causes women to be bent down, crippled.

By contrast, GOOD theology gives women their voice, celebrates and allows them to use their God given gifts and abilities (the gifts of the Spirit are given to *each* one, regardless of gender!) for the glory of God and edification of the body of Christ, the church. Good theology affirms and sets all people free, women included, and allows them to stand up tall.

2) Slavery and Apartheid

We all know that for years both slavery and Apartheid were justified by using select scriptures to back up these oppressive ideologies. BAD theology. This particular interpretation and application of scripture contradicted countless other scriptures – ones that speak of justice, righteousness, loving our neighbour as ourselves, acknowledging that all are made equally in the image of God etc.

We know that GOOD theology brings "good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and lets the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18, quoting Isaiah).

It took much theological debate and wrestling before slavery was abolished and before the Dutch Reformed Church finally declared that Apartheid was in fact a heresy. It contradicted the nature of God.

3) Divorce and remarriage

A literal reading of verses relating to divorce (eg Matt 5:31-32) condemns those who remarry as adulterers, who are in danger of going to hell. Is it really as clear and simple as that? Consider the pastoral realities of many – what if there has been abuse, unfaithfulness? What if a marriage has for whatever reason irrevocably broken down? Where is there room for a theology of God's

forgiveness, grace, healings, the chance for new beginnings? The church grappled with these issues for many years, and finally reached the decision (about 30 years ago) that whereas we affirm that marriage is a divine covenant intended to be binding for life – there is now the possibility under certain circumstances to allow divorcees to remarry with the blessing of the church.

4) **LGBTI and Provincial Synod**

In September, our Provincial Synod will be discussing a motion concerning our pastoral response to those in our parishes who identify themselves as part of the LGBTI community. The question is – is the Bible really as clear about issues of gender and sexuality as many claim? I think not.

Some point to select verses with the attitude “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that’s all there is to it”. Many are not even prepared to engage or grapple theologically and pastorally, or apply the known tools or principles of Biblical interpretation to these scriptures. In a similar way to which in the past the Bible was used to silence and exclude women, with select verses, (eg preventing divorcees from remarrying) the Bible is also being used by many Christians as a weapon to justify making our Gay and Lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ feel second class, undervalued, sentenced to a life of enforced singleness and celibacy, and denying them the opportunity to exercise their God given gifts and abilities (which are spiritual gifts, given by the Holy Spirit, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation). Some say they must repent, because they have ‘exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones’ (Rom 1:26-27). Yet most will testify to the fact that that their ‘gayness’ is fundamental to who they are – they did not chose to be gay, rather that is how God made them (and are they not also made in the image of God?). Others say they need prayer for healing (from their God given sexuality?). Others say that even though we acknowledge, love and affirm their sexual orientation, they may never enter into a committed relationship (civil union). The scriptural passages relating to homosexuality say nothing about committed relationships. I think it is fair to say that all Christians agree that sexual promiscuity on the part of anyone is not permissible (sex outside of marriage), yet surely the challenge then is to engage with a Christian ethic that can be applied equally to heterosexual and gays Christians alike? I suggest that such a Christian ethic might be that all sexual relations must be in the context of a faithful, loving, committed, loyal, monogamous and lifelong relationship. Is it so wrong and sinful to allow our Gay brothers and sisters this same opportunity (as their heterosexual brothers and sisters in Christ) for love, companionship, commitment in a civil union?

Turning again to our Gospel reading today – is the church, like the Pharisees in the story, not in danger of being found guilty of keeping the members of the LGBTI community – like the woman - bent over, crippled, weighed down, by our reading and interpretation of the scriptures. Are we perhaps keeping them captives rather than embracing them with the Good News of God’s unconditional love, affirming and celebrating who they are as brothers and sisters in Christ, setting them free to be the people that God created them to be?

So the debate, wrestling, engaging with the scriptures continues. Provincial Synod has a big challenge ahead of them – as do we all. What is the voice of God saying to us as a church, concerning these issues? They need our prayers.

So, returning to Theological Sunday, I hope you can appreciate how important it is that we raise in our church theologians and those who are well equipped with theological tools of interpretation to help us, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to grapple with the scriptures and seek together to hear what God is saying to us as a church as we deal with the complex issues of our time.

Conclusion

On this Theological Sunday, let us thank God for the gift of the Holy Scriptures, through which God speaks to our hearts and lives. Let us pray:

- That many will hear and respond to the call of God to serve in the ordained ministry of the church
- For the College of the Transfiguration; that God will inspire all who teach and all who learn, that together we may be equipped with the necessary tools we need, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to grapple with the difficult pastoral and theological issues that face our generation.
- May the church of God be faithful in proclaiming the Good News of God's unconditional love and salvation, the good news that brings God's kingdom of justice, righteousness and freedom for all.