

<b>Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> December 2016</b> <b>Cathedral, Grahamstown</b> <b>7.30 &amp; 9.30 a.m.</b>		<b>Advent 2</b> <b>16 Days of Activism against gender-based</b> <b>violence (25<sup>th</sup> Nov – 10<sup>th</sup> Dec)</b>
Isaiah 11:1-10	Psalm 72:1-7, 20-21	Romans 15:4-13
		Matthew 3:1-12
<b>The subversive Christian</b>		

“The infant will play over the cobra’s hole, and the young child dance over the viper’s nest. There will be neither hurt nor harm in all my holy mountain; for the land will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:8-9)

Words from the prophet Isaiah – a picture of hope, a new world of peace, harmony, no more fear; the whole world full of the knowledge of God. A picture of the kingdom of God, the rule or reign of God, that is promised with the coming of the Messiah – a promise and a new world that began to unfold with the birth of Jesus Christ; the new world of love and peace and hope. A world that seems unlikely, even impossible, yet it is this picture of enemies reconciled, the wolf and the lamb living together, the calf and the young lion feeding together – that Isaiah holds before us across the centuries as a promise from God. A reason to hope. A reason to live.

## 16 Days

Today falls within the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence – violence against women and children - 25<sup>th</sup> November to 10<sup>th</sup> December (International Human Rights Day).

Gender violence – violence against women and children includes<sup>1</sup>:  
domestic violence – physical violence, verbal abuse, emotional bullying and control;  
sexual assault and harassment;  
rape – including multiple rape as a tactic of war, or as a way to intimidate and silence;  
human trafficking and forced prostitution;

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<sup>1</sup> ACNS *Anglicans join 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence 25<sup>th</sup> November 2016*

harmful traditional practices [child marriages, female circumcision]; the growing phenomenon of “blessers” – “who are, simply put, wealthy elderly men who lure young township girls in need into abusive relationships.”<sup>2</sup>

Bishop Ashoke Biswas, Church of North India, spoke on behalf of us all when he said recently:

“We want to categorically say that violence against women is incompatible with the teaching of Jesus and is incompatible with the life of a disciple of Christ... Violence against women is a sin and destroys the relationship God intends between men and women.”

Gender violence happens when power and hierarchy and control confront helplessness; when anger and rage and frustration become the dominant language in a relationship. Sometimes, tragically, gender violence is justified by a distorted view of scripture, or of male headship and authority. And as has been highlighted each year with the Silent Protest at Rhodes University, and more forcefully with the #RURreferencelist protests in April 2016, gender violence seems to have become part of our culture, a culture that needs to be transformed.

May you and I, as followers of Christ, honour and respect one another, love one another as Christ has loved us.

## **Advent**

We continue in the season of Advent, with the theme of the Christian hope of the coming of Christ.

Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) summarises the theology of the season of Advent as the three comings of Christ, past, present and future: “In the first coming [his birth at Bethlehem], Christ was our redemption; in the last [his return as Lord and King] he will appear as our life;

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<sup>2</sup> *To the Laos – To the People of God – Advent 2016*

in this middle coming [the present], he is our rest and our consolation.”

Our readings pick up these great themes:

The theme and promise of the Messiah, on whom “the Spirit of the Lord will rest: a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and power, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord; and in the fear of the Lord will be his delight.” (Is 11:2-3) – a prophetic picture of Jesus Christ, who will come and make all things new. Christ born at Bethlehem, who came as our redeemer,

The theme of hope and expectation: “May God, who is the ground of hope, fill you with all joy and peace as you lead the life of faith...” (Rom 15:13). Christ who will come again, as our life.

The theme of his coming now – in the present – our rest, our consolation: the strong words of John the Baptist, with his call to prepare, to repent, to turn from sin.

It is a strange time of year, in many ways. SA is in holiday mode. Shopping malls are full of pa rum pa pa pum!... and beating on my little drum... “O Come all ye faithful, born this happy morning” as we push the shopping trolley towards the ice cream... there is glitz and glamour, parties and preparation, gifts and feasts, holiday plans for some; there is all the end of year hype and excitement as people enjoy the Festive Season. And it *is* wonderful, especially the family reunions and times together.

But there is more to it: as we do all these holiday things, we are called to consider deeply the prophesies of Isaiah, with his vision of a new world.

We are presented with the hard, jarring words of John the Baptist, with his call to prepare for the coming of Christ in glory; this uncomfortable figure, dressed in simple clothes, eating fruit and honey, living with utter simplicity; putting to shame our easy

materialism and abundance; telling us to “bear fruits worthy of repentance”; urging us to prepare our hearts and lives, to move on, clean out, shed the baggage of the past, live more simply that others may simply live. To be different. To be signs of Christ.

And I am not sure that we can hear these words of John the Baptist without feeling a deep discomfort: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is upon you!... The axe lies ready at the roots of the trees; every tree that fails to bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire... the wheat will be gathered, but the chaff will be thrown away and burned...” These words are there to disturb us, to unsettle us, to shake us out of complacency.

## **The subversive Christian**

The words of Isaiah, and John, are deeply disturbing. They are subversive. They are disruptive. Their word, their message, unsettles and shakes. They open our eyes to great possibilities, glimpses of heaven, traces and signs of glory. They are high sounding notes of music and magic and wonder.

Isaiah – the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him... there will be peace... the whole world will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

It seems impossible; it so often is; and yet we hear in these words our own longings for peace, for a transformed world, for those who were enemies to be able to live together without fear, without aggression. It is radical change and transformation: and John, with his words calling us to repent, makes it clear that we are to be the first signs of that: that this radical change begins with individual challenge and repentance.

To put it another way: you and I have agency; we can change things; we can make a difference; we face the huge inequalities, the structural violence of our society, the deep inequalities, the signs of dysfunction – and we are not helpless.

We are, in the best sense of the word, subversive Christians, undermining the status quo, showing a different way of living, pointing to a new world; saying that things can change.

John is the voice of God crying in our wilderness: God speaking to us in our place of despair and hopelessness - to bring a word of hope and promise.

This is a time of repentance and conversion: to hear God's call to repent, to change our ways, our lives.

It is a chance to remember and revisit our conversion experiences, perhaps when we had an encounter with a "John the Baptist" figure: a retreat or act of worship we attended, and the words and silence spoke powerfully to our heart; a serious illness that was a wake-up call. Or perhaps our conversion was someone we loved and respected telling us to shape up and change our ways; or perhaps we met a great person that profoundly touched our life.

Conversion: a time when God through our "John the Baptist" encounter spoke to us in our wilderness, with the simple message: we must re-think our values totally. We must change our life. We must find a new direction, a new purpose. We must live no longer for ourselves, but for God and for God's will and purpose in the world.

We become subversive, followers of Christ before all else.

## **CONCLUSION**

As we end this year and prepare for the next, let us do so in faith and hope, knowing that the Lord speaks into our wilderness, with his promise of peace and hope.

"The infant will play over the cobra's hole, and the young child dance over the viper's nest. There will be neither hurt nor harm in all my holy mountain; for the land will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11:8-9)

*A Latin American source, adapted into a hymn by John Bell:*

*When we are living  
We are in the Lord,  
And when we are dying  
We are in the Lord.  
For in our living  
And in our dying  
We belong to God.*

*Each day allows us  
To decide for good,  
Loving and serving  
As we know we should.  
In thankful giving,  
In hopeful living,  
We belong to God.*

*Sometimes we sorrow,  
Other times embrace,  
Sometimes we question  
Everything we face.  
Yet in our yearning  
Is deeper learning  
We belong to God.*

*Until earth is over  
May we always know  
Love never fails us  
God has made it so.  
Hard times will prove us,  
Never remove us,  
We belong to God.*

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