

## **26th Sunday in Ordinary time. Year A**

**Genesis 12: 1-10**

**Phil 2: 1-13**

**Matthew 13:24-35**

### **Return to the Centre**

I've titled these words today 'return to the centre' because I want to remind you, as a church that is becoming more and more caught up in the issues of the day, exactly where our focus lies, as Christians wanting to bring healing and transformation to our world.

It has been a week of wall to wall political drama. History in the making. Some have said we have witnessed South Africa's first non violent coup, while others claim a victory for democracy. One thing is for sure – there is a new political reality which I think, at least by the end of this week, most people see as a positive change.

One of the possible positives that have been identified by the analysts is that of greater involvement from civil society in national governance and decision making. In other words a real strengthening of democracy and the opportunity of various sectors of society playing a greater role in policy making. If this is true then the faith communities, and ourselves as the Christian church, must organize ourselves in such a way that our voice is heard and our contribution is meaningful and relevant. The opportunity is there to engage in the challenges and issues that we face locally and nationally.

Even beyond our borders the Church and particularly the Anglican church, makes an impact globally that often we neither recognize or appreciate.

For example, as part of the Lambeth meeting – a large number of Anglican Bishops took part in a Walk of Witness, led by the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was a Walk of Witness to the commitment of the Anglican Communion to the Millennium Development Goals.

In the words of the Archbishop it was a sign of

*'Our willingness as a world wide family of churches to give of our best in prayer, in work, in sympathy to all those who are working to realize these goals for the good of our common humanity'*

That's a huge commitment that Rowan has made on our behalf!

He then followed that up with some impassioned words to the UN Special Assembly that was meeting this week. You remember that was the one that Thabo Mbeki was meant to attend but had domestic matters to attend to!

The Archbishop spoke of situations in the world where the Anglican Church was making a difference, particularly on this continent.

He mentioned Southern Sudan, an area which has one of the lowest rates of enrolment for teachers in the whole world and where the Anglican Church has pioneered and pushed forward recruitment and training of teachers.

He spoke of Burundi where the Anglican church and especially the Mother's Union is working on yet another post conflict situation to raise awareness of women's issues (especially women who have been traumatized by violence) to raise awareness of domestic violence and to improve female literacy.

In Northern Uganda he spoke of the work that our church has been doing in Agricultural training.

These are all ways in which the Anglican Church is already contributing to the MDG's. In support of this effort he called the Anglican Communion to a day of prayer and fasting on 24<sup>th</sup> September, our Heritage Day. The Episcopal Church held the day on the 25<sup>th</sup> in support of the commitment and in support of the UN Special Assembly. Rowan prayed:

*Let this meeting be an occasion where the consciences and the hearts of all are truly touched and changed; turned towards the needs of the poorest, turned towards the recognition that we have it in our hands to make a difference. To bring welfare and happiness to our neighbours and so finally also to ourselves – so that together, as a united human family sharing and loving, we may show on earth something of God's peace and God's love, and send out a message of real hope.*

I want us to feel connected with that global prayer for change. I want us to feel a part of the Anglican Communion that is making a difference world wide.

I'm sorry that not more of you were able to experience our Diocesan Family Day on Wednesday. Again it was an opportunity for us to remember we are part of something bigger, part of a broad movement making a difference in the world.

But, after that rather length introduction, there's a problem!

With all this fervent activity in trying to solve the world's problems we can easily lose sight of the original good news. We can get so caught up with the issues of the day that as Christians we forget the nature of our core business – the gospel, the good news of Christ that we are mandated to proclaim - the word and inspiration that is both taught by Him and personified in Him.

I believe our focus must be on the author and founder of our faith. It must be on the one from whom we derive all power, all authority and all inspiration to live out in this world what we sometimes call the gospel of the Kingdom. Thabo said on Family Day this is a time for 'service delivery', we must, he said, deliver on our commitment to share the good news of Christ and bring others into the sphere of his transforming love.

Remember we will only have something valuable to say to the world if we immerse ourselves in Christ, to such an extent that our minds are transformed, our hearts renewed and our lives are alive in the power of the resurrection.

Yes I know we are still in the Season of Creation, and today we are asked to consider the crucial issue around land reform and food security – I could give you a lecture about that! But what I want to underline today is that anything we say in addressing these issues must arise out of our life in Christ, our being in Christ. Otherwise our words are simply echoing the voices of the secularists. And while that may be important to some extent we cannot miss the opportunity to echo the voice of Jesus – what does he want us to say. What springs out of our intimate relationship with Him, our knowledge of God through Him and our saved, transformed lives in Him?

I was in a rather lively discussion on Homosexuality with a group of retired theologians on Tuesday who seemed to be approaching the subject from the outside rather than returning to the centre for inspiration. I drew this diagram ([link to Christ centered engagement diagram](#)) which shows concentric circles with Christ at the centre, surrounded first by stories and scripture, myth and ritual, then by the values and insights that flow from the revelation out to the outer circle which can contain all the issues of the moment. The arrows showing the direction from the centre to the periphery is the path of real Christian social engagement. We must always begin, we must always return to the centre. From that centre we have fallen - it is to that centre we must return. It is the reality behind the rites, the truth behind the dogmas, the justice behind the laws.

We return to the centre, as we return to the altar, to be fed, to be taught and to be filled with Christ's spirit. Then strengthened through his word and sacrament, we adopt the kingdom values which then impact on our animated engagement with the issues.

Another quick example of how this works. Yesterday I witnessed the destruction of 5765 guns in Kuils River – the second provincial melt down this year. An amazing sight thousands of weapons being lifted up by a giant magnet to be deposited in the fiery furnace! But the point is that that operation which actually helps to save lives and make South Africa a safer place in which to live, is only possible because one man, his name was Peter Story, was so absorbed in the person of Christ that in 1993 as we were facing our first elections amidst all the horrific violence of that time, said why not start a national movement to get rid of guns in South Africa. That inspiration led to the start of a movement and a small number of committed people influencing the constitution and then rewriting gun legislation, which now makes it possible for Captain Sharon, our SAPS Firearm Director, to confiscate that number of illegal weapons from our communities. This all came about from one ordinary Christian allowing the strength of his knowledge of Christ flow outwards to impact on a deep need in society. It all started with one person assuming the mind of Christ.

Isn't that a wonderful passage from St Paul – we sang it just now

*'May the mind of Christ my Saviour  
Live in me from day to day*

*By his love and power controlling  
All I do and all I say.*

Phil 2.v5

Your mind, your attitudes, your values should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who, says St. Paul, 'humbled himself, took on the nature of a servant, made in human likeness, became obedient to death even death on the cross.

And God raised him up and gave him a name above every name, so that every tongue can confess that Jesus is Lord  
Mighty words!

Jesus is Lord as we've just sung

Jesus is Lord, creation's voice proclaims it – you see even in this Season of Creation we cannot replace Jesus with creation – creation itself points to Jesus. If we get it right with Jesus we'll get it right for the environment and for everything else.

Psalms 121 is often misunderstood, when we lift up our eyes to the hills we may be inspired but our real help says the psalmist comes from the Lord, he is my rock, my refuge and my strength.

The truth that the world needs to hear from us is hidden, it's sometimes covered with a few layers of habit and convention and even ardent social action. But it is a treasure buried in a field, it is a pearl of great price, it is an open secret.

It lies open on the heart of Jesus.

It lies open in the embrace of God.

It lies open in each of us finding ourselves again as being precious and loved in God's eyes, and renewed and transformed by the spirit of his Son.

So whatever the issues we face, whatever the political context – one thing is demanded of us, that we must constantly return to the centre of our faith, and remain rooted and grounded in his love and in his presence.

Then 'being filled to the measure of the fullness of God', we can play our full part as God's co-creators bringing words of life to a broken and wounded world.

John Oliver

28<sup>th</sup> September 2008