

Wednesday, 11 December 2019

Sermon preached at the Institution of the Rev Timothy Lowes

Institution of the Rev Timothy Lowes as Rector of the Parish of St Michael and All Angels, Observatory, Cape Town

Readings: Psalm 122; Isaiah 22:1-14; 1 Peter 2: 11-3:7

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, people of God in this parish, and your new Rector, Father Timothy, Nina and your family: it is great to be with you this evening and to share in your joy as you receive your new incumbent.

Let me begin by thanking you for your wonderful welcome on our arrival here. Thank you for inviting me, and many thanks to Fr Tony, who with the assistance of other priests here, has kept the fires burning during the interregnum. Thank you Fr Tony, for who you are to God's church and also for taking me through the progress you have all made during the interregnum. When I was here on Mothering Sunday in March, I shared my apology to the Churchwardens and to you all for the length of time it has taken to appoint your new Rector, and indicated that I had put out feelers in the Communion which I hoped would enable us to interview potential candidates soon. Today I have come to fulfil that promise as we institute Father Timothy as your new Rector.

Isaiah speaks of "the valley of vision" which is a symbolic title emphasising that the prophet's own base, from which he has surveyed the nations, is not exempt from judgement. This was at the time of the final Babylonian siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, from about 588 to 586 B.C..

Here Isaiah gives us early warning of a crisis for Jerusalem. He predicts where the escapism – and the contempt for God's wrath and justice – which he sees will end. He foretells the fall of Jerusalem a century away, with its casualties of famine, its fugitive leaders and its houses torn down to strengthen the wall. However, God's design was to humble his people and bring them to repentance. Their lack of belief displeased God, who viewed it as sinful, shameful and something for which they were not likely to repent.

As members of this Parish and Diocese, what lessons can we draw from this passage? How could we respond to God's reaction to the Israelites? Considering what they might have done differently, what could we do differently to meet the challenges and the warnings of our times?

My own experience of receiving an early warning of a societal crisis came in the 1990s, when, arising from clinical work I did as a psychologist, I began to volunteer at a shelter for abused women in Johannesburg, operated by a project called Women Against Woman Abuse. That experience exposed me early on to a phenomenon, the seriousness of which was only just beginning to be recognized in the church as we began to move away from apartheid. Counselling the women who lived in that shelter, I couldn't believe that human beings could be so evil towards one another. I have written elsewhere of how I heard stories of men inflicting burns on women, kicking pregnant women, inserting objects into their orifices and stabbing them in

their genitals. I wept with women and children as I heard of obscene phone calls, of incest, of a boy allowing a friend to rape his girlfriend and of children being raped in front of their parents. That ministry, as I have written previously, was profoundly depressing and made me realise that man, if left to his own devices, could wipe out the whole of humanity.

And of course in recent months and years, the depth and breadth of this crisis have become increasingly apparent. So as this year's 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence come to an end, I appeal to us all: let us not allow this crucial matter of urgent – no, more than urgent – this matter of desperate concern to our society not to fall off our agenda as we struggle in our daily lives how to overcome practical everyday problems such as loadshedding.

Turning to another of our day's readings, Peter in his first letter (1 Peter 2:1-10), clearly gives the Christian position before God and surveys the richness of the salvation that believers enjoy when they are in communion with God. This, perhaps, may be the answer to the problem highlighted by Isaiah. Peter here mentions that Christians are born anew by the mercy of God and are being guarded by the power of God and look forward to obtaining complete deliverance from evil.

Earthly trials, no matter how challenging and difficult, help us sift out what is really genuine in our faith. So we should rejoice that if we face up to and meet our personal and societal challenges, we will come to rejoice in how God blesses us for doing so. Triumphant faith in the unseen Christ has two results for the believer: in the present, an expressive joy even in the midst of adversity; and in the future the prospect of the fuller realization and enjoyment of salvation.

Sisters and brothers, Christ is mentioned as a 'living stone' that is rejected by humankind but chosen by God (v.4). And so believers are not literal pieces of rock but persons, Peter maintains. They derive their life from Christ, who is the original living 'stone' to whom they have come. Also the house is spiritual in a metaphoric sense but also is formed and indwelt by the Spirit of God. We have to understand that every stone in the house has been made alive by the Holy Spirit, sent by the exalted living Stone, Jesus Christ.

As we gather here this evening, in this church with such a rich and unique history in this Diocese, we celebrate the institution of Father Timothy as the new Rector of this special parish. As we commit him, Nina and the family to you and the church, we also commit him to this community of Observatory. It now becomes your responsibility to strive to work together in building the kingdom of God here.

I urge you, Father, to lead courageously the people who are under your care. May you be that window through which they who are under your care see God, since you are ultimately answerable to God for the quality of that care.

You are all called to reflect the holiness of God, to offer spiritual sacrifices, to intercede for humankind before God, and to represent God before all people. Therefore, choose the precious cornerstone on which to build a strong foundation for the Church in the here and now.

And so Father Timothy, as you take up this new ministry, you are called to reach out

to those who have sinned and call them back to God. You have to keep your spiritual integrity intact, resisting becoming like those who resist God. You are called to reach out to everyone, whether they accept God's message or not. That is the essence of your call to this ministry and parish.

May all of you work together to transform this parish, this community, the city of Cape Town and the world.

God loves you, and so do I.

Amen