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Provincial Youth Consultation – ‘Message of Motivation’
11 September 2010

[Reflection around Lk 6:43-49, set for Eucharist of the Day – therefore, either begin with:

There could hardly be a better place to start these reflections than with this morning’s Eucharist Gospel Reading ...

OR, if they chose their own readings:

Preparing for these reflections, I looked at the Lectionary readings for today, and found that there could hardly be a better place to begin than with the Gospel set for the Eucharist ...

And for either, continue:

So let me just read it to you [again]:

Lk 6:43-49

Jesus said to the crowds, ‘No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

‘Why do you call me “Lord, Lord”, and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.’

One of the most wonderful aspects of Scripture is that it has something that resonates with all of us, no matter what our personality.

I wonder how you think of your life, and how it will unfold in the years ahead.

Do you think of it in terms of something organic, a living thing that will grow and develop?

Or do you conceive of it in more concrete terms, something to be constructed and built?

What is clear here, is that Jesus is keen to connect with everyone, no matter who they are, or what makes them tick.

Whoever we are, he wants us to be able to grasp his message.

And so he gives two very different accounts of what, to a considerable degree, amounts to the same thing: What life are you choosing for yourself?

Jesus' Challenge to Those who Hear his Words

Everyone needs to ask themselves this question from time to time – to check what goal we have in mind (or indeed, that we have a goal at all!), and whether we are headed in the right direction.

But of course, it is a particularly acute question for young people.

What subjects will you focus on, as you progress through school?

What do you intend to do after you finish your studies?

Such choices can be scary.

It is as if, with every choice, we open up some possibilities, and close down others.

For example, if you stop studying mathematics at some point, there is a whole range of subjects you will not be able to study later, or careers that you won't be able to pursue.

And it is the same with the more personal side of life.

If you go out with one person, you can't – or you certainly **SHOULDN'T** – go out with someone else at the same time!!

And if you choose to live in Jozi, there is no point in complaining that you miss the sea!

In this passage from St Luke's Gospel, Jesus is asking us to make a far more fundamental choice.

'What sort of person do you want to be?' he says.

'Are you up for living life the right way – being part of the solution to the roller coaster ride that is being human?'

'Or are you going to be part of the problem?'

If you don't make a choice, you are in fact already choosing – choosing not to make the effort.

And that is pretty much the same as choosing to be a problem to yourself, and a problem to others, whether family and friends, or wider society – even to the life of your country!

Because how we live matters!

How we live, makes a difference!

Living with Significance

Mind you, if you were to believe the television – especially the adverts – you might imagine that the only thing that counts is being rich, or powerful, or famous.

It is as if you have to be wealthy, or occupy some senior position, or be in showbiz, or else you don't matter.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Every single person on the planet is significant – every one of us makes an impact through the way we live, and the choices we make.

Most of all we affect those immediately around us – our family, our friends, our community, our colleagues. But we affect far more people than we will ever realise.

All of us are like pebbles thrown into the pond – the ripples spread and spread and spread.

I'm sure you know and recognise it from your own lives.

Who brought you up? Who were the significant figures around you, when you were small? For good or ill, they doubtless had a lasting effect.

What about school? Just think about the influence good and bad teachers have had on who you are now.

What about neighbours? Friends of the family?

Who was instrumental in your faith, your being a Christian? Who are the people whose impact on you contributed to your being here today?

Sometimes a person you meet only once can leave a lasting impression that stays with you for years – even the rest of your life.

And they may never know that they touched you in that way.

[Personal example ...]

Consider the people you admire, the people you look up to, the people who are your best possible role models.

And I don't mean someone like Madiba or Archbishop Desmond Tutu – I mean people you really know.

Perhaps it is a parent, an aunt or uncle, an older cousin, a teacher, a youth group leader, a rector or other priest, or someone else from your childhood.

[You might want to get to break into pairs, and each spend two minutes telling their partner about this person, and why they have been significant.]

Let us thank God for these people *[perhaps a prayer]*

Now, the question Jesus asks, is whether you are prepared to be someone like this – someone who also has a significant positive impact on the life of others.

For the sake of argument, I am going to assume that your answer to this question is yes!

At the heart of these two parables from St Luke's gospel is Jesus' explanation of how it is we become such a person: a person who is part of the solution – indeed, part of God's solution – to human life today.

The Tree that Bears Fruit

His first illustration is the fruit tree.

A healthy tree bears good fruit, and a fine harvest; an unhealthy tree bears a poor crop of bad fruit.

How do you grow a healthy tree?

The first thing is, you have to plant it in the right place!!

Not in thin rocky soil, for example.

What would be the Christian equivalent to good, deep, rich soil?

Well, Jesus, of course. St Paul tells the Ephesians that we are to be 'rooted and established in love' – the love of Jesus Christ (Eph 3:17,18).

Or, to use a slightly different metaphor, I am sure you will remember Jesus' words to his disciples at the Last Supper, telling them that he is the true vine, and they are branches, which must 'abide in him'.

And if we abide in him, we will bear 'much fruit ... fruit that will last' (Jn 15:1-17).

In other words, if our lives are rooted in him, what we do will have significance not only for this life, but for all eternity – this is what it means to be part of building the kingdom of God.

I wonder if you have ever thought of this? – that if you live God's way, you will make a difference that will be remembered for ever in heaven?

Amazing!

Another important factor in planting a tree is the availability of water.

Jesus speaks of himself as providing 'living water' (Jn 4:10; 7:38).

Or perhaps you remember Psalm 1, which says that the person who walks in the ways of the Lord is like a tree planted by a stream, whose leaves never wither, and who yields fruit in due season.

Now, there is another way we can understand how a tree can best bear good fruit.

There are often times when we have very little choice about our lives, about where we find ourselves planted.

It is as if we have no option over what soil we find ourselves in. We know we want to be rooted in Jesus, but the circumstances don't seem very promising.

What can we do then?

Well, any gardener can tell you that there are plenty of things you can do, to improve the situation.

There is application of compost and fertilizer. There is regular watering. There is keeping down the weeds, and the insects that destroy the fruit. There is even pruning!

What are the equivalents for the Christian life?

We need to be fed and watered.

First of all we need to ensure we have a good daily diet of prayer and reading the Bible.

Clergy promise to say Morning and Evening Prayer daily – but you might also find it helpful to use Bible Reading notes: especially ones that not only give you a Scripture passage to read every day, but also provide background on when and where and why it was written, and explain what it means for us today.

And Sunday by Sunday we should be fed by our time in church – sharing in worship, learning from the sermon, receiving the strengthening of Christ's body and blood.

Sometimes a tree gets a specially concentrated application of fertilizer – the sort of thing that comes from going on a Christian conference, where there is an intense programme of teaching.

We can also read Christian books, that feed both our minds and our hearts.

And retreats – an intense time of prayer, of learning to pray more deeply, and listen to God – are also important in feeding us spiritually.

What about the weeds, and the insects?

Well, I think that is about deliberately choosing not to allow 'bad habits' to take root in our lives!

There are lots of temptations to drink too much, or get caught up in drugs, or to go beyond what is healthy in our relationships, or to spend our time with people who are bad influences – and various other ways we can get into bad habits.

Then we have to take action, to uproot the weeds, or to get rid of the insects.

And sometimes there is pruning – when God takes the initiative to cut the tree back, in order to encourage stronger growth.

Jesus at the Last Supper told the disciples to expect this.

Indeed, he said, pruning is a mark of our heavenly Father's love – he doesn't want us to run wild. He wants us to be as productive as we can be.

So today, whether through holy weeding and pest control, or through pruning, I wonder if God is calling you today to change your life in some way?

[You might want to lead them into another pause at this point, for them to reflect on this challenge, and in silence, for them to commit to uprooting some weed from their life, or accepting some pruning. Perhaps you have another personal anecdote to tell them.]

In our reading, Jesus also goes on from good trees bearing good fruit to saying ‘A good person produces good treasure from their heart – out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.’

If we fill our lives with good, holy, gospel-shaped influences, then we will live good, holy, gospel-shaped lives.

Then, whether it is through being a good spouse, a good parent, a good colleague, a good neighbour, a good academic, a good business person, a good doctor, a good public servant, a good politician, a good volunteer in some local NGO, a good member of the School board or local council – whatever we do, we will be an influence for good in the world.

The House that Stands Firm

But perhaps trees are not your thing.

Perhaps you want to say to me ‘Archbishop, I certainly do not have green fingers – I’m better at killing plants than growing them!’

Well, the building metaphor is more likely to work for you!

If you are building a house, you must choose your site carefully.

Unlike the planter of trees, for you, solid rock is a good thing!

The strength and stability of a house depends hugely upon its foundations.

Jesus is exactly such a rock.

St Paul, writing his letter to the Romans, says that for some Jesus is a stumbling stone, who causes them to fall.

But those who put their trust in him, will never be put to shame (Rom 9:33).

And elsewhere, he writes of Jesus as the corner stone – the big stone in the foundations which acts like an anchor for the whole building (Eph 2:20).

Yet building on rock is hard work.

Sinking foundations into solid rock requires time, effort and persistence.

So too does the Christian life. It is not the easy option. It is not for sissies.

It requires dedication and commitment – the sustained effort of putting God first every day of your life.

It means that no matter how late you partied the night before, you still get up in time to start the next day with God, through prayer and reading your Bible!

And this is not just something you do on days when you feel enthusiastic, and faith gives you a high.

That is building on sand.

No, it is something you commit to follow every day, for the rest of your life.

Because it does not depend on your feelings – but depends on the promises of God, which are solid as a rock.

And when you build on rock, as Jesus says, when the challenges of life come, the difficulties and the battles, you will be able to stand firm.

The Challenge to the Church

Now, so far, I have applied the challenge of Jesus to us as individuals.

It is also a challenge to the Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

In my Charge, which I preached when I was installed as Archbishop, in St George's Cathedral, Cape Town, in March 2008, I put it this way.

I said that in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, we need to be partners in the gospel, who together seek afresh what it is to be the body of Christ in our time; and to answer the question of who God is in Jesus Christ for us, here and now.

Most of you are too young to have any real awareness of how much apartheid dominated life in South Africa in the bad old days – and how much that spilled over into the life of neighbouring countries.

It influenced almost everything we did - it was as though it was the first factor we had to take into account, in looking at the context of the Church's life.

Now, thanks be to God, we no longer have to do this!

This has meant a radical change.

So we have to step back, and listen to God, and see what he is saying to us about how we can be fruitful trees, safe houses, in this new era.

This is at the heart of the Vision process that the Province is following.

In fact, it goes back to Archbishop Njongo's time – he realised that we needed to let God renew our understanding of who we were, and who he is calling us to be.

Since I became Archbishop, we have been working at this rather harder.

At the end of the month, Provincial Synod will meet, and we will consider the recommendations from last year's Provincial Standing Committee.

On the basis of work from a task team, they have proposed the following:

Vision: The Anglican community in Southern Africa seeks to be

- Anchored – in the love of Christ
- Committed – to God's mission
- Transformed – by the Holy Spirit

Mission statement: Across the diverse countries and cultures of our region, we seek:

- To honour God in worship that feeds and empowers us for faithful witness and service
- To embody and proclaim the message of God's redemptive hope and healing for people and creation
- To grow communities of faith that form, inform, and transform those who follow Christ

Priorities: To make this vision a reality, and help us form a comprehensive response to the many inter-relating socio-economic challenges we face in our region, we have identified the following priorities for acting at Provincial level, to support and strengthen the life and mission of Dioceses, for the years 2011 to 2020:

- Liturgical renewal for transformative worship
- Theological education
- Leadership formation
- Health: HIV and AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis
- The environment
- Women and gender
- Protection and nurture of children and young people
- Public advocacy

Two other themes – transformation, and holistic mission that is rooted in a full commitment to evangelism – run through and undergird all eight priorities, rather than being matters to be addressed separately.

Please do pray for us, as we meet in Benoni, from 29 September to 2 October, that we will listen faithfully to God's specific call upon our lives.

The priority of protecting and nurturing children and young people relates not only to your spiritual life, but to every aspect of growing up; for we recognise that the Church can also be involved in creating a safe and healthy environment for children to grow up in.

We also recognise that we need to take account of the young people in our churches in all the other priority areas.

So, for example, within liturgical renewal we must address what helps young people to worship 'in Spirit and in truth'.

Our health policies must connect with where young people are, especially in relation to HIV and AIDS.

Leadership formation must include nurturing leaders to work especially with young people; and nurturing young people as leaders for tomorrow.

And it must certainly include encouraging and challenging young people to consider the possibility that God is calling you to full time ministry in some way – perhaps to ordination; perhaps to become a religious, a brother or a sister in a religious community; or perhaps some other Christian work.

We look to you to provide input to all of these debates. We cannot decide 'for you'. We can only take these decisions with you – knowing that God is with you too, and his Spirit will lead us all forward together, as the body of Christ.

Conclusion

Let me sum up these reflections.

Jesus asks us all this question, 'What sort of person do you want to be? What sort of person is God calling you to be?'

He asks it of us as individuals. He asks it of us as the Church.

He challenges us to be rooted in him, to build on rock – or, to use the words of our Vision, to be

- Anchored – in the love of Christ
- Committed – to God's mission
- Transformed – by the Holy Spirit

Are we ready to say 'Yes' to this calling?

I'm going to finish here for today, leaving that question with you – but tomorrow, in our Eucharist, I am going to say more about how we discern God's call for us, as individuals.

So let us turn now to your questions!