

Sermon for a Combined Confirmation Service for Anglican schools in Cape Town

Sermon for a Combined Confirmation Service for Anglican schools in Cape Town, St Saviour's Church, Claremont:

Readings: Jeremiah 18: 1-11; Psalm 139:1-5,12-18; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14: 25-33

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear people of God, heads of participating schools – Mr Stewart West of Herschel, our host school this year; Mrs Sue Redelinghuis of St Cyprian's; Mr Guy Pearson of Diocesan College; and Mr Julian Cameron of St George's Grammar School – also friends and families, it is a great joy to be with you today and share in this important milestone in the lives of the confirmation candidates. Let me also greet Bishop Garth and Marion, whom I saw as I entered the church today. Indeed, there is life after retirement!

A warm welcome to you all. Thank you for inviting me and, most importantly, thank you to the school chaplains – the Revd Lorna Lavello-Smith of Herschel, the Revd Andrew Weiss of St Cyprian's, and the Revd Monwabisi Peter of Bishops, for preparing the candidates for confirmation. A special welcome to Revd Monwabisi who attends this service for the first time in his new capacity. A special welcome also to the parents and godparents of those to be confirmed during this service. Thank you, Canon Jerome and your team, for hosting and Revd Lorna, for preparing for this service and for this wonderful service booklet. I love it when we as Anglican schools in our diocese meet and worship together – those who pray together stay together.

Today we come in the presence of God to witness this special gift with which God, out of his goodness, will endow you, the confirmation candidates: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into your lives. The rite of passage that you pass through today empower you to practise your faith more effectively in every aspect of your existence, deepening your relationship with God and strengthening your spiritual lives.

We pray that you will be equipped with gifts to worship, to witness and to give service. Everything else we do flows from worship. In worship we praise and pay homage to God. Through worship we give God His worth, recognising that God first loved us.

Today's Gospel (Lk 14:25 -35) is about the cost of discipleship. Jesus says "No one who does not carry his cross and come with me can be a disciple of mine" (v.27), indicating the enormity of the claim which is implicit in his invitation to us to come to God's banquet. The discipleship he calls us to means a readiness to place God's claims on us above those of family and self. The disciple must be ready even to face death for the sake of Jesus, which is what martyrdom is about. Jesus spells out the radical demands of true discipleship because he knew that many were following him for selfish and superficial reasons.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, in his book “The cost of discipleship”, writes about discipleship as a costly grace. He makes a clear distinction between “cheap” grace and “costly” grace. Cheap grace involves wanting forgiveness without repentance, baptism without church discipline and communion without confession. This he says, is grace without the cross and grace without Jesus Christ. But costly grace confronts us as a call to be prepared to make sacrifices to follow Jesus. It is costly because it compels us to submit to the yoke of Jesus in following him.

Friends, are we prepared to be true followers of Jesus? Yes, it will be costly. Costly grace comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken and contrite heart and it enriches our lives and it brings us salvation. As confirmed members of the church of God, we are to speak for God in all places and at all times. Wisdom helps us to discern what is wrong from what is right.

The Holy Spirit which you are to receive instils in you the courage to stand for what is right in the sight of God, especially under difficult situations, when standing firm can mean facing rejection, verbal abuse or physical harm. It requires firmness of mind to endure evil and stand for what is good. Perhaps this is what Jesus required of his disciples in this Gospel reading.

Today we also pray that you be equipped for service to God and to God’s world. We are called to serve God so that his glory shines through us. Jesus came to serve and not to be served. Just as we are called to serve God, we are also called to be faithful in our Christian service. When God calls you and me, we are entrusted with responsibilities that will in the end glorify not ourselves but God.

Looking at South Africa today through the lenses of worship, witness and service, what have we witnessed, and what are we witnessing today? Can we be called true disciples of Christ and witnesses to the truth? And how best can we be of service to God, remembering again that our struggle is against the principalities of this world?

Surely at the top of our minds today must be the need to act together to fight the scourge of gender-based violence in South Africa. I was among many who lobbied the President this week to speak out and to mobilise the instruments of government in a concerted effort to defeat this evil, and it is heartening that civil society is rallying so strongly to respond to the emergency we are facing. I am particularly proud of the action that you in our schools have taken this week, whether it is the condemnation and public protests in black that have come from the young women of our schools, or the commitment of the young men to set an example to society by treating all, but especially women, with respect, dignity and compassion.

The violence we are seeing in society, whether in individual acts of crime such as the assault and killing of women and children, or in the attacks by crowds on migrants and refugees, are indicative of an unstable society torn by pathologies and dysfunction. South Africa needs a turnaround strategy to address issues of equal opportunity, education and employment, and I will continue calling on President Ramaphosa and government to address these as a matter of urgency.

We in the church are deeply disturbed by the recent orchestrated attacks on citizens from outside our country – sadly called foreign nationals – for no one is foreign, all are all God's people and all are Africans. I am appalled and ashamed by the violence meted out against them, especially against truck drivers, and at the prejudice voiced

against these vulnerable people who come from beyond our borders. We are dismayed by the inept statements that fuel mindsets of rejection in the public discourse, and which disregard the trauma of displacement that these, God's people, have to endure. Have we forgotten the pain that apartheid forced removals inflicted upon us? It is shocking that there are now those among us who want to inflict that pain on others. We can't be ambivalent, we can't be insensitive, to God's people who happen to be from outside our borders. Jointly with my colleague, the Archbishop of Nigeria, we condemn the violence meted out against them and as Archbishop I express our prayers for the traumatised and our condolences to those who have lost members of their families.

I want to thank President Ramaphosa for addressing the nation on this matter but pray that he will follow up and demand that the responsible branches of government act firmly, and especially that those who attacked people and looted their homes and businesses will be arrested and prosecuted. I have also called on the ambassadors of South Africa in the countries whose nationals have been affected to offer apologies on behalf of our country and our churches. I have just attended the World Economic Forum and the buzz-word has been cross-border trade. How can we expect other countries in Africa to trade with us when we demean and mistreat others?

I am also calling on members of our church and all those in the household of faith to contribute in whatever way possible to help those who have been the victim of attacks. I confess my own intolerance, and our intolerance as South Africans, and I commit my church to create spaces for dialogue where we can look at how we can support one another theologically, pastorally and in a practical way so that we move away from only condemning the government and towards being part of the solution ourselves.

While the darkest night we have experienced since liberation in 1994 has ended, it is clear that the new dawn promised by the President will not meet our hopes and expectations if we don't all pitch in and work to realise its potential.

Historically, we South Africans have achieved most when we have realised that if one member of society suffers, if one family suffers, if one community suffers, we all suffer. We succeed when we focus on what we can create together, when we allow hope to flourish and don't stress over what we cannot control. If we are committed to embrace the New Struggle, my prayer is that we will heed Jeremiah's understanding of God at the Potter's house (18:1-11). What was important was not the spoiling of the clay, but the perseverance of the Potter in making clay into another vessel. Friends, the Lord is the shaper of the clay, shaping it according to God's purpose.

It is at turning points such as this in your lives and in the life of our communities and our country that our destiny is shaped. Destiny is a matter of choice, not of chance. I appeal to you, especially to those being confirmed, as you embrace Jesus's call to be his disciples, allow him to shape you and form you in accordance with his will for your lives. And in our national life, I pray that all of us will embrace our New Struggle, that we will awaken our consciences and demonstrate solidarity and commitment to a culture of values-based decision-making and care for one another in ways including the protection of women and children. In that way we can be of service to our schools, our families and our beautiful country.

As I conclude I want to thank Mr West, who is leaving us at the end of this year. We wish him well for the future. We also wish Mr Pearson well in your retirement in June next year, and Mrs Sue Redelinghuis, who is retiring at the end of the year. Apart from being happy to count you as friends, you have both made outstanding contributions to education and done us proud. We will miss you and your families.

The God who began that good work in you, will perfect it into the day of Christ Jesus (Phil.1:6). May God bless you, your family and God bless South Africa.

And as you know, God loves you and so do I.

Amen.