

20141116ThanksgivingSundaySermon

Today is our Day of Thanksgiving. To-day we bring our commemoration of 180 years of the worship of God on this site to its conclusion. But it doesn't mean we stop our worship of God on this site.

Or does it? Well, that depends on you. In the present we can celebrate the past but we must always have an eye on the sustainability of the future.

At our recent Clergy School, we explored Richard Rohr's concept of the Cosmic Egg. Richard Rohr is a well known Franciscan monk who writes on spiritual matters. In a book entitled *Scripture as Spirituality* he presented a drawing of three egg-shaped domes. The inner smallest dome he labelled 'My Story'. In this dome are all the events and happenings in our individual lives. The next dome is labelled 'Our Story' and this dome obviously encases the smaller My Story Dome because we cannot live as isolated individuals. As John Donne wrote: *No man is an island entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were. As well as if a manor of thy friend's Or of thine own were:/ Any man's death diminishes me,/ Because I am involved in mankind, /And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; / It tolls for thee.*

This middle dome is Our Story – the story of ourselves and our family, our neighbour, our workmates, our friends. Finally there is the outer and largest dome, incorporating the other two. This Rohr labelled 'THE story' – basically God's story, the story that controls each and everyone of us, in ourselves, in our interactions with others and of course our interaction with God.

At- a previous clergy school we explored 'my story'; but it became obvious as the week progressed that many had not yet told their story, nor unloaded the hurt their story brought them.

The Archbishop pointed out in the keynote address that these three levels could be applied not only to human beings but to organisations too. So he spoke of the Diocese of Cape Town in terms of My Story, Our Story and The Story and he linked it to Past, Present and Future. He said too often we do not move from My Story (the past) into our story (the present) and on to the future – THE story or God's story.

What about our Parish? We have a banner proudly saying that there has been worship of God on this site for 180 years. Look around you and see how beautiful this place of worship is. This age and heritage is something to be proud of; something that only three other parishes in Cape Town can come close to. It is our heritage. This heritage is also something we can celebrate in the present. But we must have a vision for the future. So our parish too has the triple dome, MY STORY – the story of our past of who we are today because of our past – OUR STORY – who we are today because of how we interact with our community – THE STORY – because we are looking ahead to what God wants from us so that in the future, our children's children can use our present to be their past.

As the Archbishop spoke I had a vague uncomfortable feeling that he was addressing Parishes such as ours. I asked myself "Aren't we perhaps dwelling in the past too much?"

The Archbishop drew a square which he divided into four smaller squares. In the first he put down what he called the most important reason for the churches existence, MISSION. In the box below that he put GOVERNANCE. In the upper right square he put ADMINISTRATION and finally in the bottom right he put SUSTAINABILITY. How does our parish measure up to these four quadrants?

Mission is important. I've run a Lenten course a few years ago on Evangelism. I think it was as much for me as it was for you because I'm scared of being a Evangelist, of sharing my faith story. Desmond Tutu has said, that we have to do mission because there is nothing else.

Mission I would say is both past and present. In the past through the missionary endeavours of the clergy and the people of St Paul's, this parish has a church building; it was the centre of the community where community members could be baptized, married and buried regardless of their colour or economic background. Reading through the Parish Council Minutes and the Parish Magazines, one can see Christian mission at work – in the school held in our hall open to children of all races, in the building of our chapelries in Athlone, Gatesville, Black River. Wonderful heritage, but what of the present? Today our church still reaches out to the students at UCT and other colleges around this area, being a home church for them while they are away from home. You know, it is when you stand back from the Sunday to Sunday events that you see the mission of our parish. The food parcels, the soup kitchen, the use of our hall by the wider community for meetings and events, our lay and ordained members playing roles in the wider community. All of this is telling of OUR STORY.

Now those who have been in the parish for many years might be saying that the numbers have dropped – we can just compare the picture taken a few weeks ago with that one taken in 1994 to see that. But I must say is that mission work is not number crunching but heart changing, though numbers do help in the finances, helps in the

sustainability of our future. As a slight aside was something I saw as a comment on the Thinking Anglican website speaking about the drop in numbers in the Church of England. It said: "*Secularization is the trend... Studies in the US say that younger people, under 40's, are interested in the ancient liturgies and music that isn't "dumbed down." They want to question, they don't want pat answers. This all speaks well for Anglicanism, except for this: they can't tolerate intolerance of LGBT people or misogyny or any of that culture war stuff.* Does this hold true for ACSA and in Africa generally? Are SA young people just as intolerant toward LGBT people and their exclusion from being married in Churches? Is this yet another nail in ACSA's coffin? The comment went on: "*The younger folks also want to see churches that walk the talk, i.e. feed the hungry, cloth the naked, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. I.e., they want to hear the church proclaim the Good News and to actually do it rather than wallow in hypocrisy.*"

The Archbishop addressing the Clergy at the school spoke about how we were all tired and stressed. He spoke about how we need more and younger clergy which made me think about some of the spiritually mature and highly intelligent UCT students here at St Paul's? We have a heritage of a fair number of laity from our parish who have been ordained. We need clergy who are well educated and the Archbishop's interest in the Theological Education Fund is well known. But we also need the finances to pay for those clergy – not only to be educated but also to receive stipends. We have a assistant priest's house but at present we cannot afford one. At the recent synod many motion dealing with deacons, lay leadership, management of property all arose to address the continued sustainability of the Diocese. Your Thanksgiving Offering in the Special Envelopes will also play their part in sustaining our parish

In those envelopes there was a slip of paper which read "I am thankful to God for _____." And you were invited to fill in the blank and place the paper with the envelopes in the offering plate. I'm so pleased that one parishioner said to me that I left too little room for her to say what she is thankful for. Just before the peace we will have a moment silence when we can recall OUR STORY and for what we are thankful, what we wrote on that slip of paper and offer it up as a prayer to God.

But what does it mean for us to live as a people of thanksgiving? Our readings today show us that "thanksgiving" actually really means "remembering." To live as a people of thanksgiving means, first and foremost, to remember our past and how we entered into a relationship with God and then in the present to live that out in our daily lives. Let me remind you of three verses from the three readings: Deuteronomy 8:11 says: *Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today.* Then Paul writing in 2 Corinthians 9:13 says: *Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others,* and finally Luke 17:15 speaks of the one thankful leper: *Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.*

I can see three ways these scriptures speak into our situation – if we are to be proud of our heritage, carrying out mission in the present moment, and trying to be sustainable in the future we have to firstly, **not forget God by keeping God's commandments**; secondly **by the generosity of our giving** and thirdly by being like that cured leper who was thankful and **praise God with a loud voice.**

But Thanksgiving should not be limited to a special celebration every 180 years or even only one Sunday each year, but rather should become a way of life. By constantly remembering our relationship with God, we are freed from a mindset that tells us we must hold on to everything we have for fear of future scarcity. Instead, our remembering opens our hearts to extravagant generosity, which, in turn, will produce thanksgiving to God. As Paul said: *You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us.* Now that is a way to have mission as our outlook and to be sustainable into the future. If I'm still alive in 2034 won't you please invite me to your 200th Anniversary to share My Story, our Story and the Story.