

SYNOD 2012

OPENING ADDRESS ON THURSDAY 17 MAY 2012

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WHAT HAS SHAPED OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

LUKE 24: 44 TO 53.

INTRODUCTION:

As I have stood from the unique and privileged vantage point of the Office of the District Bishop and seen our Natal Coastal District over the last three years, I have seen and experienced many wondrous moments, which has enhanced my own growth. I thank NCD for showing confidence in me and Conference for appointing me to this station. I have so many memories of wondrous encounters that to name them all would take all weekend. (Most of these memories are captured in picture form on NCD Face Book dating back to 2008)

Kindly allow me to share something of my most recent memories of wondrous encounters.

In terms of our projects: We celebrate the many feeding schemes, HIV and AIDS testing; wellness-testing all are beginning to show signs of impact. Every Circuit is implementing projects related to our mission imperatives in one way or the other.¹

I have warm memories of my Easter pilgrimage to Nongoma, Mahlabatini and Melmoth this year.

I had some unexpected wondrous encounters especially on Good Friday in Nongoma where I was invited to offer a summary of the seven words of the cross. When I came to the verse “I thirst”, I spoke about how South Africa is a water-stressed country. Water is more precious than gold – you can’t drink or eat gold. I told the congregation that on my way to the venue I had driven through water running across the road. This for me was serious wastage and needed to be addressed by the local council as a matter of priority. When I said this there was some laughter from the congregation. They pointed out that the person who was translating for me was one of the local councillors in the area and that this fell under his responsibility. I quipped that this is a prophetic moment and that God wanted this situation to be corrected. I then went to connect this with the words “I thirst” and how Jesus offers us living water even from the cross.

I had further discussions with the Local Councillor over lunch. I hope the next time I visit the area that this water problem is fixed.

¹ Yet we need to be careful that all we do is welfare which ends up as toxic charity.

There were many other significant wondrous encounters since Synod 2011. The World Methodist Conference; the YMG celebrating 100 years through the busy streets of Durban... all this has shaped me and our District in one form or the other.

Jesus before his ascension had a unique vantage point as he looked across Jerusalem/

Fr Paul Nicholson² says that even today a on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem a guide will show a stone from which Jesus supposedly ascended to his Father.

Jesus stood looking across Jerusalem as is today, to a city that was occupied by military forces.

As he gazed out across the city for the last time before he ascended:

He would remember the human way of dying and death.

Memories of racial conflict between Jews; Samaritans and Gentiles would be remembered.

He would remember the suffering of people under the Roman imperialists.

Conflict, sporadic violence, weeping for a friend who had died; sad memories of how stubborn people are to embrace the Kingdom of God in spite of him trying to simplify it in every day images through parables.

He would have remembered the pain of betrayal by his close friend Peter and Judas.

He would remember the agony of the decision he had to make in the Garden of Gethsemane

He remembered how difficult and exhausting it was when he wrestled with the adversary in the desert and how he grew strong through that experience.

He would remember as he gazed across Jerusalem and spotted the house where the special ministry and care of him was given with tender love by a former sex-worker, Mary Magdalene.

He remembers with a slight grin how when he was 10 years old how anxious and frantic with worry his parents were when he went missing and how he had realised his vocation / calling in life in his dialogue with the temple fathers, where his parents eventually found him.

The joyous memories when the disciples finally got what he was about. The fellowship, laughter of his friends would have warmed his heart.

His sense of satisfaction and fulfilment at the thought of how differently-abled people who were blind, lame, filled with mental problems found wholeness in their encounter with him and God.

He now had to go to the Father so that those on earth could carry on with the ministry he had started.

² Words for Today, IBRA 2012 page 139.

How, we may well ask, might all of these experiences and memories have helped shape Jesus as a person and his message?

Fr Paul Nicholson asks: “What memories of the city would he be taking with him as he returned to the Father?” What choices had he made in spite of his circumstances?³

Tonight I want us to briefly look at:

1. **What has shaped your/ my relationship with God?**
2. **Are our lives being shaped in similar way to that of Jesus of Nazareth?**
3. **One hopes that what shapes all of us and our Church – is the Jesus dream for humanity**

1. **WHAT HAS SHAPED YOUR/ MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?**

Whether your background is urban, township, suburban, informal settlements, inner-city or rural, how has it influenced your relationship with God?

In a research programme about serial killers – some of the worst in America, it was found that the experiences of violent abuse in their childhood shaped their actions in later life.

What ideologies and social constructs have shaped us?

From a personal view point I wear symbols on finger and wrist which speaks to me what consistently shapes my relationship with God:

- My wedding ring – my wife who is a significant influence and inspiration to me.
- A leather bracelet which my daughter gave to me – reminds of how wonderful being a father is, watching my daughter blossom at every stage of her life. I would encourage all fathers to be present at the birth of their child. The bond last forever.
- I wear a bracelet that was made in Haiti a place that was virtually destroyed by natural disaster and how the poor suffered the most. This bracelet reminds me delay of the suffering of people.
- I wear a beaded bracelet which has a Rhino symbol. This reminds me of my responsibility for the care of God’s creation.

The Apartheid era shaped many of us (even though many of us are in denial of this) and we still act out some of these practises. The recent statement by FW De Klerk in an interview with CNN, in which he said that Apartheid Homelands is model that the rest of the world must use toward Africa, shows how he is shaped. Perhaps there are those in the church that

3 Words for Today, IBRA 2012 page 139.

would prefer to practise separated development by having whites, coloureds, Indians and Blacks only circuits.

The sad thing in our country and church is that many of us who are parents are still shaping our children to be racist, sexist and xenophobic etc.

This generation has also been shaped by the Cold War; fear of Communism and fear of the West.

In our District we have a population of seven million. 70% of whom are under the age of 35. We as church need to pay more attention to this very important group within our mission. The 'born frees' are of special note. Because how 'born frees' are influenced now, will have consequences in the future.

Why is it when 'born frees', who have been directly shaped by living under the social conditions of the past era, don't carry the same baggage? They should be shaped by different conditions today?

Why then are these 'born frees' behaving as racists; sexists; bigots; prejudiced against people from other parts of Africa? Is it because they are being shaped to be like this at home? Or is it by immature political leadership? As opposed to be influenced by transformative and progressive leadership.

Why does a 'born free' white model use the 'K' word? Where was this learnt and who shaped her?

Why does a 'born free' black young person feel that 'all whites should have been killed'? Where does this come from? What has shaped her? Is it the home; parents; immature political leadership?

The so-called Y-generation has been shaped by technology – Face Book; twitter; etc.

There is now Generation Z also known as Gen M or N because of their multi tasking abilities and the fact that they grow up knowing only a time that has the World Wide Web – this has shaped them.

In the USA this generation is also known as the homeland generation because of the war on terror has been their main historical reference. Ironic this generation is also known as the new silent generation but I'm not sure why

Why at the same time are some of the born frees and Generation Y and Z very comfortable in the presence of peers from other race groups?

When you speak to these 'born frees' about racial categories they often don't understand what we oldies are talking about. They only know Mary as a friend. They only know Lindiwe as a friend.

What has shaped our 'born frees' with this healthier attitude? Their parents? Their social networks? Their relationship with God in Christ?

In an article in the Mercury on Monday 14 May the ANC is recognising that it has to take the 'born frees' more seriously. There is the recognition that "the "born-frees" would not have lived under apartheid and that there would be a difference in thinking and expectation between those who were loyal to the ANC because of the Struggle against apartheid and those who were born into democracy. "

When we reflect on what shapes us? How does this shape our relationship with God?⁴

2. ARE OUR LIVES BEING SHAPED IN SIMILAR WAY TO THAT OF JESUS OF NAZARETH?

Are we filled with genuine agape love for all even our enemies? As Jesus did.

Are we breaking barriers between social outcasts and available healing resources? As Jesus did.

Do you love so much that when you see injustices you will get indignant and turn over tables in the temple? As Jesus did.

When you love so much that you become angry when children are sidelined and abused you say bring them they must suffer no longer? Let us bless them. Let children become the centre of our care. Jesus did this.

You and I often do not always have a choice of the circumstances and situations around us, but we can choose how this shapes us. We can choose how it shapes our relationship with God in Christ.

What has shaped our local church – what does it look like?

What shapes our Circuit?

What shapes our District?

What shapes our Connexion?

3. ONE HOPES THAT WHAT SHAPES ALL OF US AND OUR CHURCH – IS THE JESUS DREAM FOR HUMANITY

The Jesus dream is when we are in harmony with God; self; neighbour and nature. It is when we are 'one' with the God of the Universe, through Christ and 'one and undivided' here on earth. It is like the Mustard seed that has grown into a tree providing shelter for all the birds.

⁴ Fr Paul Nicholson reminds us on this Ascension Day that Jerusalem "remains the holy-city, the source from which God's life-giving word will flow into the world. My own faith, and yours, finds its fountain head here from when the first disciples have been clothed with power from on high....What do you know of where your own faith came from, and those responsible for evoking it within you? How have you become a link in that same chain, passing the faith on into the future?"

It is when Gal 3:28 "...there is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free; for all are one in Jesus Christ" becomes a reality.

It is when as a Methodist Church we make real our Conference conviction (L&D 1.11.1 p225) "that the visible and structural unity of our people is the will of God and that it reflects the mind of Christ in his prayer that they all be one;.... That the world may believe that you sent me (John 17:21)

There are glimpses that the Jesus dream is becoming a reality in some churches like Montclair (mixed language service, with a contemporary feel); Richards Bay; Kwangwanase; Nongoma; Greenwood Park, Melmoth (welcome others from other parts of Africa); Empangeni Circuits etc. (I hope some of you will challenge me and say why were left out or I don't agree with some of the churches you have mentioned)

It is when the Mission Charter of the MCSA helps shape us as Church.

1. Becoming a church in solidarity with the poor
2. Providing training for Evangelism – I am happy to announce that we are going to have something in place by the end of the year. I will be having meeting with all the ministers etc. We will also be launching reaching 1 Million people in our district campaign later this year.
3. Training ministers (and laity) for the African context
4. Implementing anti-bias training
5. Becoming a more Youth centered church

Is the Vision of the MCSA 'A Christ-healed Africa for the healing of the Nations' shaping our church?

Is the Gospel of Jesus Christ for healing and transformation shaping our Church?

All this I believe is the dream of Jesus who wants to shape our church in these ways – if we are willing.

When we discuss the changing of our structures we need to bear the dream of Jesus in mind.

When we discuss our resolutions and the way we do this we need to keep the dream of Jesus in mind.

Conclusion:

We started by imagining what memories Jesus would take with him to the Father.

What is shaping you now - the dream of Jesus? Or something else?

What memories will you take into the presence of God?

What shape will you be in when you or I enter the Presence of God?

What shape will the MCSA be when we enter the Presence of God?

While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried into heaven.”

Luke 24:51 AMEN