



ACNS

Watch the sermon

Read the text of the sermon below:

Deuteronomy 6:6-16, Psalm 1:1-6, Ephesians 4:8-16, and Matthew 28:16-20

Farther Sampson, thank you for translating. I am sure that the sermon you translate will be better than the sermon that I speak. So listen to him rather than me!

The higher a tree grows, the more likely it is to need deep roots. When the storms come, only the roots make a difference. The older a society or a nation becomes, the more it needs to tell its story; so that in each generation we renew the sense of who we are and why we are here now.

But telling the story is a dangerous process. We can keep hatred alive by telling the story of what we have suffered. In the United Kingdom, in one part of our country where there was 30 years of violence, we have to learn to tell the stories of reconciliation, not of hatred.

So where our own history, as all histories have, contain tragedy and cruelty and sin; it is not only what story we tell, but how we tell it that makes the difference.

A few weeks ago I went to Berlin in Germany with my wife. We visited a museum of German history. For the period from 1933 to 1989, the period of Hitler and of Communist control of East Germany, the story was told very well indeed. The facts were clear of the terrible things that happened. The museum explained why the world had given judgment against Germany. And yet the story was told so that visitors could think for themselves and themselves see why those horrors were serious.

By the grace of God, Zambia does not have stories like that. And yet in every nation, the stories must be told well and the discipline of telling stories well is seen in our first two readings from Deuteronomy and Psalm 1.

The book of Deuteronomy is Moses' last will and testament. In it, he points to past mistakes and future dangers. He recalls to them the mercy of God that they have received and he recalls to them the promises of God that they have for the future. The book is a lesson in how to remember. Our reading starts with Deuteronomy saying 'tell the story again and again to your children and grandchildren. And it was necessary that this should happen.

When they first had the book, the Israelites were a pastoral people living in tents, raising livestock. But within a generation, after a series of wars, they conquered the land of Israel and settled in cities and towns.

Do you remember what it is like to move from the countryside to the City? Many people here from the ACC, from Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi, and Zambia will remember such movements. Yet the step for the Israelites was much bigger. For 40 years they had lived with the visible presence of

God in a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of smoke by day. They had lived in intimate relationship with God – close to God. Suddenly, they had neither a single leader, nor a single people, nor a single purpose. And suddenly, the pillar of fire had gone and they had the law to observe.

In England in the 19th century, the move to the cities led to the church losing contact with the people. In the country, they were poor, but they had lived alongside one another: the clergy next to the farmers, and to the land owners. In the cities huge numbers of people were lost to view, and soon lost to the church.

So what we see in Deuteronomy is a precaution against something that I am sure that you understand in this Province. And it is a precaution against something that we have suffered in England. Deuteronomy is a precaution against forgetting God when we are in the urban landscape, or in more comfort. It is a precaution against us changing God from someone who calls disciples to someone who is a tool for our own good.

But how do we remember, what stories do we tell?

Deuteronomy starts with saying to us that the stories must be about the God who has revealed Himself to us. We must not just tell the stories that we like. When our children were small we always read a Bible story with them each day. And if you have family at home, it is a good thing to do with children. But the problem with was that they liked some stories better than others. For example, they loved the book of Ruth, which we are studying in the ACC. But they found the books of the law and the prophets a bit more difficult. If we turned somewhere other than Ruth or Esther, or Nehemiah, or the Gospels, they would say: “No, no no, Dad. Give us something else.” And then they would say: “Dad, act out the story.” But to save you embarrassment I won't do that today.

So Deuteronomy is not only a book of rules and laws, but a tool to teach the way of God. And the people of Israel needed it. As soon as they settled in the land, they began to forget. God raised up Judges, and then Kings, but they still forget. Forgetting is natural to human beings. Too easily, we forget our history, we forget our values, we forget our God.

Deuteronomy reappears centuries later when it is found in a wall of the Temple during repair work. When that happens it is read aloud to the King and causes a renewal of the faith of Israel, a return to holiness. God's word, used properly, corrects both ignorance and sin.

What we see in Deuteronomy is that memory must be based in the reality of the God who saves. The Israelites were to tell their children, in a ritual of question and answer, about the salvation and freedom God had given. Because they were to remember, when they were in a place of comfort, even a place of copper mines, if you look in Deuteronomy 8. That although they looked back to heroes who had led them in the past into freedom, those heroes were nothing without the God of justice and righteousness.

It seems a long time ago and far away. Yet in this ACC we are guided by history. In this Province, whether in Malawi, in Zimbabwe, in Botswana

and in Zambia, history matters; and in this nation of Zambia the story of Independence, the challenge of tribalism, the capacity to change governments peacefully – these are stories that matter.

Those stories need telling, but they need telling in the way of Deuteronomy. They need telling with God at the centre of them. And more than that, because we are what the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church calls ‘a Jesus people’, we must tell the stories with the risen, living Jesus Christ at the centre of them.

Every country which has a Christian heritage must have a Christian centre to nourish that heritage, and thus it must speak of liberation and reconciliation, of peace and human development. But it must always speak of them as the gift of a gracious God. In recognising our dependence on God, whether as individuals, as a church, as the ACC or as a nation, we find our true freedom.

Secondly, the way we tell the story is set for us in Psalm 1. Because Psalm 1 describes righteousness as something which is sustainable, and evil as something which carries the promise of its own destruction. And so when we speak of the story of the church, of the story of the nation, of the story of society, we must speak of both righteousness and wickedness.

In Burundi, a few weeks ago, I spent a few days with the church, and also with politicians. I have been going there since 2004 and I have seen their effort to overcome their civil war and find a common history in which to speak of their divisions. But once violence is in a society, finding your common history is so difficult – we have discovered that in Europe and in the UK. And for us as Anglicans, good history telling is not only centred in God but describes failures and successes honestly. And the way we tell our stories as a church, the way we tell them as a nation is tested by Psalm 1. It asks us: are you telling your stories in ways that demonstrate sustainable flourishing, development and life, or division and death?

So when you speak and pray of countries in conflict, pray for them to find the right way to tell their history so they see the hand of God calling them to life, not death.

It is the same for a nation. In the UK we are in the midst of a campaign for a referendum on whether we stay as part of the European Union or not. To date the campaign [on both sides] it seems to me risks being vague, unrealistic and negative. Psalm 1 describes what righteousness looks like in our message as Christians or indeed in a political campaign.

Righteousness describes sustainability, not simply optimism. It describes strength and endurance, rather than hoping that something will simply turn up.

Our message as a church, or our message as a nation, lacks righteousness when it is full of scoffing, injustice, violence and manipulation. And

how often as Christians we need to repent of that in the church. We lack righteousness when we suggest power or leadership in church or nation or across the world is for the benefit of the winners only.

We lack righteousness when we promise refreshment that has no source in God. When we do that, whether we are churches or whether we are nations or whether we are in politics or anywhere, we may call ourselves Christians but we act like atheists.

So our history as a church, as it continues to be developed by this ACC, must be God-centred and righteousness pursuing. And whether it is in Zambia or elsewhere or in the UK, I pray that your elections will be God-centred. I pray that they will pursue righteousness. I pray that for my own country.

But even so, to tell a story, to be a people of a story that is based in righteousness, is not enough. The church is called in the Letter to the Ephesians to build a whole new vision of what it is to be human. In Ephesians we see that through Jesus we are equipped to become what God calls us to be. This is a message for you and for me, for the church in our work of continuing the work of Christ, in our mission of setting lights shining in every community.

Yes, we must tell a story of God's liberation. Ephesians speaks of righteousness, it rebukes corruption, it condemns violence, it stands against everything that hinders the common good; it stands against all that hinders solidarity, justice, the treating of the earth's resources as a God-given trust for all humanity. Yet, even more than that, towards the end of the reading that we had today, the Letter to the Ephesians calls the church to be a visual aid of what it means to be a complete human being. In the Ephesians we are called by Paul to maturity. And maturity in Ephesians means looking like Jesus Christ. Even if everyone agrees together, even if our own arguments prevail, we cannot be satisfied until we look like Jesus Christ.

And the moment we remember that, we see the insanity of power struggles and faction fighting in the church. Because it is Christ who brings gifts, says the reading, and gives them across the church, to bring us to maturity. But too often, both as individuals or as groups within the church, we take the gift and we put it in our pocket and treat it as our own. And if we get it out, we get it out to use against someone next to us.

Of course there will be debates and discussions. Paul talks about the need to resist wrong doctrine and calls for unity of faith. But we will only discern right and wrong when we listen and love. When we apply the gifts we are given unreservedly for the good of all those who call on the name of Christ.

This works both globally and locally. In the week before Easter I was in a parish in Kent in my Diocese. It's a very poor parish. The church had been built 150 years ago and like many churches in England was normally only used for a few hours a week. But in the last three years there has been a new priest, and this priest has started a community bank for micro-finance, and she provides food for the hungry. And then she realized

that they needed to teach skills so that people would not be hungry. And then they taught them about family life. The church is now full of life, of service to the community, and it demonstrates to me what it is to grow into the likeness of Christ, and it's being used every day of the week.

Of course, the priest has not done that by herself. She has formed partnerships, seeing the gifts given by God, as in Ephesians, for the task to which he had called the church. They worship, they pray, and they bring people to faith in Christ. We must have no illusions: it is fragile and often messy. They discuss things, they make mistakes, but gifted by the Spirit they are growing into life.

Can the ACC do that for the whole Communion, not just for itself? Can this wonderful Province go on doing that in Malawi, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe? Because the question for all institutions nowadays, for all churches, in an era when it's easy to get reports of what is really happening around us, the question for us is no longer only what we say but also what we do. That's why I say, also, pray for your politicians, because they have a very difficult task and they need the gift and grace of God.

Lastly we came to Matthew's Gospel, because what do as God's people is not for us but for the world and every human being living in it, and for the whole creation. The last thing Jesus does is to send his disciples out, he says: "Go." One of my great predecessors, William Temple, said that the church exists for those who are not its members. We show that we come from Christ when we go out in humble and joy filled service; when we go out singing and dancing, when we rejoice in worship and are full of love, when we are not judgmental, when we do not fall into the old church habit of throwing stones at the weak and flattering the proud and the strong.

That is such a hard thing for all of us, in the church or in government, to do. Do we serve the weak or do we flatter the strong? Is our message so full of Christ-centred hope that it creates societies of hope? . . .

That is also the last test for all of us who are Christians. Jesus's words at the end of Matthew say to us, is what you are doing about you? Or is it also about going out? Is it mainly about going out? And if it is about going out, which it must be, do we have so much of the good news alive in us that we consciously seek to introduce people to Jesus who has filled us with joy and hope?

Pope Francis said a couple of years ago, why is it that so many people going out to talk about Jesus look as though they're going to a funeral? So when you go out today, dance and rejoice! Because Jesus has so captured us with liberation, he has so guided and sustained us in righteousness, he has so equipped us for maturity, that we are to be the people who make disciples.

Praise to Christ our risen Lord! Amen.

13 min read

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