

Sermons at Saint Mark's

Fr Michael Lapsley S.S.M

The Day of Pentecost: The Fiftieth Day of Easter, June 4, 2006

Acts 2:1- 11; 1 Corinthians 12:4- 13; John 20:19- 23

Called to be signs of contradiction

In the name of Jesus Christ, the young Prince of Peace Amen.

Dear sisters and brothers, I am delighted to be back here in this cathedral church. It was about two years ago that I was last here. Thank you to Robert for being brave enough to invite me back a second time.

Also I want to thank Mother Ann for the role she has played in organizing, capably assisted by Eliacín, the Healing of the Memories workshop that is happening here at this cathedral this weekend. Also particular thanks to Peggy and Juhani and their family, Zoe and Bailey who have been hosting us with their characteristic great generosity.

I would like to bring you yet again greetings from South Africa. It seems that you are on a roll at the moment with your South African visitors. Of course it is not his only claim to fame, but Archbishop Desmond Tutu is the patron of the Institute for Healing of Memories, and I was saying at the earlier Eucharist that I am surprised that you don't have the South African flag flying outside the cathedral. And I'm sure you know that David is also a closet South African, as well, so there is no end to the South African connections.

But I would like to bring you greetings from the Cathedral Church of St. George in Cape Town where when I am in Cape Town, which is not often, I am a parishioner -- but also on behalf of my

community. I am a member of an Anglican religious order, the Society of the Sacred Mission, working in South Africa, in southern Africa since 1902. And of course being a member of a religious community is one of the ways that Christians can live out their baptismal promises, so it is appropriate to mention that on a day that we will also be having baptisms.

Whenever I think of infant baptisms, I think of risk. Infant baptism is a risk because we cannot guarantee what choices the infant will make as the child grows to adulthood. What we can do is love and love and love, pray and care for, which is, of course, the same kind of risk that God takes with us all, a God who gives us the ability to choose and loves and loves and loves, and gives us the freedom to choose life or to choose death.

I was conscious that on this Pentecost Day, that there was a range of things that I wanted to say and they didn't quite fit together, so I thought I would simply share with you a series of different reflections. I was taught that today is the birthday of the Church, so I know that the 11 o'clock service is more solemn than the nine o'clock, but nevertheless would you turn to the person next to you and say "Happy Birthday"? -- because of course today is our birthday, the birthday of all of us. So what a wonderful day to have baptisms on the birthday of the Church.

As I said, this weekend I have been with my colleague who is also here from South Africa, Ndukenhle Mtshali. We have together been participating in a Healing of the Memories workshop.

So what is this healing of the memories? What we have sought to do is to create a safe and sacred space where those who come can explore their life journeys at the level not of the head but of the heart, but also to explore in a particular way how the past of their country or the countries they have lived in have shaped them -- have both made them, but also damaged them.

You know normally when we speak of a country, we speak of the politics, the sociology, the economics. We speak of individuals: psychologically, sexually, emotionally, spiritually, but we don't often ask ourselves the question, How has the past of my country shaped me? What do I have inside myself, both life giving and poisonous, as a consequence of the story and journey of my country?

If something terrible happens to us, or to those whom we love, it seems to me that there are one of two journeys that we travel. If something terrible is done to us or those whom we love, it is a normal human response to hate, to be bitter, to want revenge, but what then is the further response? In my experience we go in one of two directions: We either, as victims -- those to whom something horrible has been done, move on to become victimizers ourselves, or we travel the different journey from victim to survivor to victor. What I'm saying is true of us as individuals; it is true of us as communities; it is true of us as nations.

When September 11 happened, people in the United States were the victims and had the sympathy of the overwhelming bulk of humanity around the world. Hearts of compassion were moved everywhere on the globe, but the victim blew it and became the victimizer, and did not care whether those it was now

victimizing were the same ones who had caused the first act of victimization.

So the victim becomes the victimizer, and we know that is true in our own personal lives that when terrible things have happened to us, and we have got that poison in us, the only one we can often lash out at are the ones we share intimate space with: our lovers, our partners, our children, our parents. The question is what is the way in which we can take the life-giving journey away from victimhood to becoming victors -- victors in the sense of becoming participants and helping shape and create the world according to what we believe and not simply in reaction to what has been done to us?

In my experience, and this is true again as individuals as it is of nations, the step to healing often begins with a giant step from knowledge to acknowledgment -- in our families, in our communities, and in our nations. We can have guilty secrets, things that everybody knows to be the case, but there is no acknowledgment.

I wonder what it would mean in the life of the United States if there was to be a president who said, "We are sorry," to Native Americans. What would it be if there was a president to say, "We are sorry for slavery?" We know in our own intimate lives when we fight with each other as human beings, with our partners, we know the transformation that comes when we are able to say, "Dear, I got it wrong. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." And suddenly there is the possibility of a journey towards healing.

Some of you will remember that when I preached here two years ago, I spoke about the journey from destructive memory to life-giving memory; from destructive memory to redemptive memory; to memory of good that comes out of evil; of life that comes out of death, which is, of course, at the very heart of the Jesus story because the one whom we follow, the victim, did not

become the victimizer, but of suffering, crucifixion, death, resurrection and new life.

Today we heard the account of the resurrection, and I very especially asked that we would read those extra five verses because it tells the story of Thomas who was not present when Jesus first appeared to his disciples and Thomas says, I will not believe that it is the Lord unless I see the marks on his hands, the marks on his feet, and then I will believe it is Jesus.

And so the risen Christ appears again, and this time Thomas is present, and Christ says to Thomas, "Put your hand in the marks of the nails. Put your hands in my side." And Thomas says, "My lord and my God."

You see the risen Christ was also the crucified Christ. You could still see the marks of crucifixion, but the wounds were no longer bleeding. The wounds had healed. And that is God's invitation to us as individuals, as communities, and as nations -- not to be Good Friday people; not to be people who continue to crucify one another. The invitation in baptism to share with Christ is the invitation to live risen lives, to be Easter Day people.

Sadly, much of the world experiences the United States today as a Good Friday nation, a nation who executes and executes and executes, and even watches people being executed; that builds more and more prisons rather than houses for the poor; and creates the greatest gap in the history of the United States between the poorest and the richest; and has illegal wars, which will bring back into the bedrooms of the nation wounded people. But we, through our baptism, are called to be signs of hope in a dark world.

The calling of this cathedral church, which it already does in many wonderful ways, is to be a place that dances to a different drum, a place not of exclusion

but a place of inclusion, called to be a sign of contradiction through its compassion, through its generosity, through its kindness, but also called to be a safe place where hurting people can come and tell their stories.

We are all called to be wounded healers, recognizing our own brokenness and our own woundedness, and yet called by Christ to be part of a healing journey of others.

This is the last time on this visit that I will speak here in the United States, and I want to end by saying that like Martin Luther King, I too have a dream for this land, and my dream for the United States, before we all start learning Mandarin, before the United States fades as a superpower, as it will like all superpowers before it, but my prayer and my hope and my dream is that it will become a light to the nations; that it will become a nation which is an example to the human family, and it will become an example when it provides health care to all of its citizens. It will become an example when it stops executing its citizens. It will become an example when it has a tax system which doesn't create a class of the superrich and gives a decent life to every citizen of the United States.

I have a dream that the United States will sign Kyoto; that it will join the International Criminal Court. That is my dream for the United States, that it will become a place known for its restorative justice; that it will become a place that uses its might and power to create dialogue between nations; that it will indeed turn its swords into plowshares.

And we, all of us, are called to hope, to help make that dream a reality.

I hope that when you see me standing before you as someone physically broken by war and hatred, that you will see beyond the hands I no longer have, and see that in my message and in my body, in some small way, that I convey to

you a sign, that in the end, the forces of
life, of gentleness, of kindness, of
compassion, are stronger than the forces
of evil and hatred and death.

Amen.