

Advent Sunday. Theme: HIV/AIDS

Theme of Advent is one of "End times". It's an opportunity for us to look at our preparation for the second coming of Jesus Christ. Instead of following the secular world and making the weeks before Christmas an excuse for a party, the church uses the four weeks to prepare. It does this by looking at the first coming of Christ at Christmas and ensuring that we are ready for the second coming. Jesus in Luke's gospel chapter 21 gives warning of what will happen in the world before the second coming. These events are not pleasant ones and so Advent is an appropriate time for us to look at some of the less pleasant issues in our world today. Issues such as: HIV/AIDS; Oppression of Human Rights; Violence against women and children; Human trafficking.

Why did the Diocese decide that HIV/AIDS was an appropriate theme to think about as we light a candle in our Advent Wreath? December 1st is the day when the international community remembers those living and dying with HIV/AIDS. But more significantly many people see the HIV/AIDS pandemic as one of the signs of the 2nd coming. *"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Lk 21:25-27*

There will be signs. Many people are under a perhaps false impression that HIV/AIDS is one of these signs. They view HIV/AIDS as God's punishment for the sins of this generation. The trouble is 'conspiracies'. So many of us are conspiracy junkies and I'm afraid most conspiracies are linked to end times. In the early days when HIV/AIDS was not fully understood scientifically many believed that it had coming into the world through the action of God in order to eliminate the homosexual population and also intravenous drug abusers. As the disease spread to heterosexual members of society another conspiracy arose that it was created by the pharmaceutical industry in order to boost their profits. But recently Barack Obama had to distance himself from his long-term minister and confidant, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, because Wright preached that HIV/AIDS is a genocidal conspiracy administered by Anglo-American (iow White) population controllers primarily to target blacks. In SA our previous President's understanding of the disease was also very confusing leaving a lot to be desired.

Now, all this is as may be, but how should the Church respond to the pandemic? Is it one of the signs of the second coming? If it **isn't**, how should we respond? If it **is** should our response be different? One of the main problems is that it is too often linked to a "them" and "us" situation. It is always them that get the diseases – never us. This is why we tried in the past to purposely get HIV+ people who were just like us to address us so that we could see the human face of AIDS and not only statistical face. To see that it is not xyz million people living with HIV but rather that Mary Smith, in our pulpit, having communion with us, having tea with us, who is HIV+. It is through the interaction of individuals that God can transform danger into an opportunity for healing and justice. And we must respond as individuals. We must avoid the "them and us" syndrome.

HIV/AIDS is a wake-up call to the individual, the church and the nation. The HIV/AIDS crisis must continue to serve as spiritual wake up call for the church today. AIDS must force us to re-contextualize the function of the church in this pandemic situation. AIDS represents the most dangerous disease in human history, but it also presents our greatest opportunity to address the underlying vices of inequality, poverty, racism, homophobia, and gender inequality that fuel this disease.

Western medicine has transformed AIDS into a manageable disease in wealthy first world countries but for the vast majority of Africans, AIDS still represents a death sentence; thus the spread of HIV and its consequences depending upon where you are born in this world. This represents one of the greatest and most pressing issues of social injustice of our time. But we can't fully understand the AIDS crisis in Africa without understanding the devastating impact of colonialism, slavery, and the bondage of debt that has kept so many in poverty.

And as individuals we can't address AIDS without talking about our suspicions around this disease, our homophobia, about unprotected and pre-marital sex. The weaknesses and divisions within the body of Christ itself are fuelling AIDS, and it is into this that Jesus speaks. Stopping AIDS will require nothing less than the church becoming a church for all- an inclusive church.

But the problems within the church is not just about a single virus. AIDS represents a manifestation of a deeper spiritual malady that prevents the body of Christ, the church, from performing its healing function.

Firstly, healing the body of society requires that we overcome our fears around 'otherness'. Who do I mean by the 'other'? In Jesus' time the 'other' would refer to the leper, the prostitute, the sick, the poor. Today we can add to that list - those with HIV/AIDS, the refugee, the gay or lesbian. But Churches are still divided in their response to AIDS. Too many fall back on negative moral judgements that either isolate or close the door to those most at risk. Some still falsely believe that AIDS represents a sign of the end times, a punishment for sin, just as lepers were often blamed for their own condition in the time of Christ.

Too often these opinions are not rejected or challenged because AIDS awakens many of our deepest fears and prejudices around sex and sexuality. "They deserve it because of their sexuality or sexual promiscuity" we hear. Yet the problem is that the disease grows exponentially just as we ignore these issues. An "us and them" mentality is contrary to the word of God, there can only be "us" when it comes to AIDS. Thus a poster issued by the Diocese a few years ago that said "This Church has AIDS" applies.

But there are still divisions in the Church. Our divisions over sexuality and sex only drive the disease underground and hamper our response. By not knowing our status - and we can only know it if we had VCT - voluntary counselling and testing; by not talking openly about sex in the church we lose a critical opportunity to strike a blow at the spread of AIDS. We have many university students in our congregation and they need much more than information about how the virus is transmitted, they need life and negotiation skills, they need moral guidance and economic and social empowerment. But so do each and everyone of us regardless of our age. Instead of closing our eyes, tightening our fists, and ignoring our hearts we are called to stand for the least of these, even when they place themselves at risk. All we have to look to is Christ's example. Christ broke down barriers between Gentiles and Jews, the rich and the poor. His ministry prioritized healing for the lepers and compassion for the least of these in our society. Thus in order to truly model Christ we must overcome our otherness and in our response promote personal responsibility, love, as well as social justice.

The church has already made steps toward by becoming loving accepting community around AIDS. In our diocese we have Fikelela which runs numerous projects. The Diocese has an annual service, and holds vigils. Perhaps we need to re-start lighting our parish AIDS Candle before each service. But God has much more in store for Diocese and for St Paul's. Healing the body requires mobilizing the power inherent within the body itself. Addressing AIDS will require all of our diverse gifts as apostles, prophets, teachers, and workers of miracles. Our AIDS ministry must become both prophetic and redemptive. The horrific projections are not inevitable if we stand together as people of faith.

However, church-based programs and ministries will not be enough. AIDS represents one of the greatest failures of political and moral will in SA. Our government finds billions of rands to provide motorcars and hotel accommodation for cabinet members. BEE is helping to benefit the previously disadvantaged even if only a few of the rich. Yet AIDS has been ignored or a few cents given to solve the problem and this trend will continue if we remain silent! Without hearing from us, the voters, politicians will continue to give rhetoric without the necessary action and rands attached. Lives will continue to be stolen from us if we do not speak out as the people of God. And so it is our turn to fight for the very life and health of our own community as well as the world, for we are the body of Christ, when one member suffers, all

members suffer with it, but hope is not lost because we know that all things are possible through Christ.

A sign of end times? Maybe – but that does not remove the responsibility of caring from us.
Amen