

Student Welcome Service 14 February 2010

[Although more students go to the 9.30 service than this one,] Can I welcome those students that are here this morning to St Paul's. I hope that you find here a home from home; a home church away from your home church.

You know you are very fortunate to be attending a university which has high respect worldwide for its standard of learning. As your course progresses you will realize that good learning does not mean merely presenting one side of an argument, your side, or what you consider the right side. Different positions on the topic or subject being taught have to be presented and you as students have to be taught to firstly choose a point of view and secondly to be able to argue or present your point of view with conviction, so even if your lecturer disagrees with you he will accept your essay, assignment or thesis. This is what a good university like UCT will teach you as you read for your degree.

The Gospel writer, Luke, must have been a university man. He is believed to be a doctor and by his gospel and his successive books, *The Acts of the Apostles*, it is obvious that he was an intellectual and a writer of great skill. He uses many literary devices in his Gospel which help us to make connections to other writings and events in Jewish history, he appears to be the most liberal of the gospel writers when it comes to the role of women, even in the telling of Jesus parables he writes them in mirror image style. The first event in the parable is mirrored by the last, the second by the second last and so on usually have the crux or climax of the story in the middle. I could wax on lyrically about Luke's style etc all morning but let's rather look at the so-called Sermon on the Plain part of which was this morning's gospel.

Firstly, it starts by saying that Jesus and his disciples "came down" from the mountain to a level place. Two ideas already in the opening sentence. "Came down" obviously implied he had gone up. Jesus saw mountains as a place of prayer where he could be alone with God. UCT is half-way up a mountain – but it is not really a place to find peace and quiet and, I'm afraid to say, not really a place to find God! But Jesus went up the mountain to talk to God and he came down to talk to us humans. "To talk to us humans" that is the very reason for Jesus to be here – to come down and talk to us about God. That is what we were celebrating at Christmas that Jesus the Christ the Word of God came down and was born among us. Now, Luke's original readers would also have remembered their Sabbath school classes where they would have been taught about Moses going up the mountain to talk to God and Moses coming down to the plain where the people of Israel were so as to tell them what God wanted them to hear. So hearing this verse 17 being read they would have made that connection. Jesus, having consulted God, was now coming down to present what God had said to the people. But what is interesting and important for you who are students, is that Jesus does not present a one-side argument to the people. For what follows is four blessing and four woes.

I did not say that Jesus was impartial as he presented God's message, but he presents what will happen to those who are the remnant of Israel and following God's commands –they are blessed. But he also tells us about those who are lacking in the true understanding of their faith and so facing woes in the future.

To understand what Jesus is saying we need to pair the verses with each other (e.g, 20 goes with 24, 21 with 25, 22-23 with 26) This way we see the stark contrast. If we do this we will see the theme of reversal of expectations, the re-forming of the social arrangement coming through. This is what has happened at UCT. Perhaps you who are students might not see it as clearly as those of this parish who have had contact with the university over many years. What was a nearly exclusively white university has become more and more an African one - it has been socially re-arranged for the better.

Now, It would be great for the oppressed people and the disciples whom Jesus calls, if this reversal of expectations would just happen with the snap of fingers. The tables could be turned. Justice established. Hey presto! But this isn't the way life works. There is a long interim where the disciples, the hearers of Jesus' message, will experience the opposite. The reality is expressed in v. 22: "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man." Perhaps to a certain extent this interim is still being experienced up at UCT.

Now, as you spend more time here at St Paul's you will realise that I'm a great fan of verbs. Inevitably I suggested to the hearers of my sermons that they look at the verbs. Let's look more specifically at the verbs in v. 22, for they describe the formidable immediate reality for

the disciples and perhaps for us too. As we look at the four verbs (hate, exclude, revile, defame) they might seem to be in no particular order, but Luke is showing his literary skills again as the verb intensify as they go along. "Hate," though appearing to be the strongest negative term, really is not. It appears throughout the Gospels, especially in Luke and John, but has no huge theological significance. After all, the disciples and us are told to "do good to those who hate you" and "bless those who curse you" in the verses that immediately follow today's gospel.

The word "exclude" has a twofold meaning. It can mean to be separated from others as when the apartheid government separated the different race groups in this country. This form of separation is totally wrong and a gospel heresy. Or it can mean separating oneself from others for the Gospel sake. This is a form of separation you, as Christian students at UCT might have to face and carry out as you avoid the devices and desires of this sinful world.

With the last two verbs, however, we get into some heavy going. The Greek verb translated "revile," can be seen in the context of crucifixion where the thieves being crucified with Jesus "reviled" him. In other words, "revile" opens up the theme of crucifixion, mocking, jesting, taunting and giving up one's life in a humiliating way. The alert first hearers of Luke's gospel would have understood this deeper context. Finally, the verb translated "defame" is literally, in the Greek, "cast out your name as evil." But, of course, we don't speak that way in English, and so the translators "helped" us by using a word like "defame." But "defame" covers over the meaning, because the Greek word used is the same used when Jesus cast out demons. The meaning, then, is that people will not just "defame" the disciples, but they will cast them out with the kind of fervour and energy that Jesus used to cast out the demons. Once again in your time at UCT you are going to face being 'cast out' from some of your friendships and classmates because of your Christianity and your church going.

So, I suppose I need to ask you, "Are you sure you want to be a disciple?" Before the Gospel was read I [Pat] said "Listen to the Good News" according to Luke. It doesn't seem that much of what we heard read contains Good News! These aren't easy words. It is almost as if they are preparing us for Lent, which does begin on Wednesday. So we truly need to ask ourselves if we are ready for this kind of Gospel in the world that we occupy, whether up at UCT or just living here in the Rondebosch area. I hope that all of us will say "Yes".

But do we need help to do this? Yes indeed we do? What help can the Church or I offer? Love!

I'm asking the student now... besides being Sunday what day is this? Yes, Valentine's Day

Not much is known about Valentine and in fact the Catholic Church has dropped him from their calendar. But I found a legend about him, which fits together quite nicely into this sermon.

About the year 250CE, there was a priest by the name of Valentine who lived in Rome. At that time, Rome was ruled by Emperor Claudius who wanted a big army. He thought men should volunteer to join. Many men just did not want to fight in wars. They did not want to leave their wives and girlfriends. So, not many men signed up to fight. Thus Claudius decided not to allow any more marriages. Young people thought his new law was really cruel and stupid. Our priest, Valentine thought it was ridiculous! One of his favourite jobs as a priest was to marry people. Well after Emperor Claudius passed his law, he kept on performing marriage ceremonies – but secretly. He would whisper the words of the ceremony, while listening for soldiers on the steps outside.

One night, he did hear footsteps. The couple he was marrying escaped, but he was caught. He was thrown in gaol and told that his punishment was death. Many young people came to the gaol to visit him. They threw flowers and notes up to his window. They wanted him to know that they, too, believed in love. One of these young people was the daughter of the prison guard. Her father allowed her to visit him in his cell. They often sat and talked for hours. She believed he did the right thing by ignoring the Emperor and performing marriage ceremonies. On the day he was to die, he left her a note thanking her for her friendship and loyalty. He signed it, "Love from your Valentine."

That note started the custom of exchanging love notes on Valentine's Day. It was written on the day he died, February 14, 269 A.D. Now, every year on this day, people remember. But most importantly, they think about love and friendship. And when they think of Emperor

Claudius, they remember how he tried to stand in the way of love, and they laugh -- because they know that love can't be beaten!

So as you spend the next few years at UCT, when you feel down and oppressed and need help remember that we at St Paul's and the Anglican Chaplaincy love you and most importantly God loves you. In fact God has sent you a Valentine's Day card.

God's Valentine to us:

For God so loVed the world,
that He gAve
his onLy
begotten SoN,
That whosoever
Believeth In Him should
Not perish,
but have EVerlasting Life.

John 3:16