

“Jesus, Peter Storey and Christmas...”

25/12/18

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

What do we give birth to?

I recently came across a book written by Peter Storey titled *“I beg to differ – ministry amid the teargas”*. The book brought back an immediate memory of my meeting with Peter many years ago...

During the 1940s, various mainline churches in South Africa including the Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists and the Anglicans decided to use Rhodes University in Grahamstown as their training ground of choice for their ordinands. A Faculty of Divinity was established and in 1949 a dedicated residence, Livingstone House, was built to house the theologs.

Jump forward to the mid 1980s and I found myself a theolog (or ordinand) at this very same university living in the very same Livingstone House. One evening there was quite a to do amongst the Methodist students in the common room. I enquired as to what the reason for the excitement was. One of the Methodist student’s explained in an excited voice that Peter Storey; once a student at Livingstone House was due to visit us. Peter was now a Bishop in the Methodist Church and a highly respected leader. The Methodists raided the storeroom in Livingstone House and found a Livingstone House tie, like the one I have here. When Peter eventually arrived, I was aware of how tall and gracious he was. The Methodists proudly handed him a tie and I did shake his hand but as a Presbyterian student I hovered in the background and let the Methodists enjoy the limelight with him.

For many years I forgot about Peter until I came across his book recently. I knew that I had to read his life story, as I felt that I had a connection with him, even though it was fleeting and many years ago.

It turns out, once I had completed reading the book that I had no idea of the massive part that Peter played in helping our country move from Apartheid to freedom. Peter played an instrumental role in many areas in South Africa.

Very briefly, Peter grew up in Cape Town; his father was also a Methodist Minister. Peter went to Rondebosch Boys High School and early on realised that he had a love for the sea. He was privileged to be able to attend SAS Saldanha up the West Coast where he trained as a sailor for his national service. However, it was during his time in the navy that he realised that he was called to a higher vocation in his life and so he entered the ministry. He was sent to Rhodes University and so his ministry began. There are many highlights in this man's outstanding career but I would like to mention some of them this morning...

What do we give birth to?

Peter believed strongly in being involved in inner-city churches including District Six in Cape Town and the Central Methodist Mission in JHB, where he felt the need was the greatest. His forty-year ministry in South Africa was defined by sustained opposition to the infamous apartheid government and its oppressive racist policies, first in Cape Town during the forced removals of people of colour and as the first chaplain to Robben Island where he met and ministered to Nelson Mandela. Peter was an instrumental leader in the South African Council of Churches and served as Bishop of JHB/Soweto for thirteen years. Peter also spent time in Australia where he helped pioneer Lifeline and proceeded to launch Lifeline in South Africa when he returned. Peter also launched the Gunfree South Africa movement. There is a famous photograph of a person handing over an assault rifle to Peter in the sanctuary during one service.

Peter also taught in various universities overseas and assisted in the formation of the Methodist Seminary in Pietermaritzburg.

He gave me some real insight into faith and spirituality:

Peter writes that authentic faith takes us on a journey in which we invite Jesus and his teaching to interrogate every part of our lives, seeking both the desire and resources for transformation. Lived faithfully, this journey enables deep

inner overcoming in those places where we need to be different. It also makes life different by placing the turmoils of the moment into God's "big picture" perspectives, replacing our fears with serenity. It lifts up changeless virtues to inform our actions, shaping us toward integrity. It reminds us that because our lives are already given, they are therefore impossible to lose, freeing us from fear. (2018:55)

Peter also writes that being spiritual is to illuminate everyday reality with the mind of Christ. This is what the Incarnation was all about; it was when we allowed our humanness to be touched by Christ's divinity that we were given a new citizenship by which all others had to be judged. (2018:174)

What do we give birth to?

This morning we were reminded in the well-known Gospel of Luke reading how a child was born to Joseph and Mary. This child was to change the world, start the Salvation Story to which we subscribe our lives and empower us to make a difference in the world around us. Imagine for a moment if Mary refused to have the baby? How different would our world be? Would we even be here this morning celebrating the birth of Jesus and all that this means for the world?

Probably not.

This started me thinking.

Peter Storey chose the navy because he loved the sea and wanted to make a career of it. Yet, he chose to give birth to a ministry based on Jesus Christ. Peter nurtured his ministry; sought guidance and mentorship, eventually ministered to Nelson Mandela himself and in so doing became instrumental in helping to disassemble the mechanics of Apartheid over many years.

Similarly, Mary gave birth to Jesus. She obeyed the instructions of the Angels and brought the Baby to full term. Mary nurtured Baby Jesus and ensured that he received the love and resources that He needed to grow into a young man who would eventually go on to change the world. It is his birth that we celebrate today.

But what about you and I?

What have we given birth to in our lives?

Yes, I do acknowledge all of the parents here this morning that have nurtured and raised children, but I need to challenge you. Peter Storey also has children, four boys if I am not mistaken, yet he still gave birth to a ministry that changed our country and made it a better place for all.

What about you and me?

We have a conscious choice about what we give birth to in our lives in terms of giving back to Jesus. You see, Jesus grew up, ministered and eventually gave up His life for you and I. He made the ultimate sacrifice so that you and I could have eternal life.

You and I also have choices to make in our lives. What do we nurture in our lives? What do we tend to and grow in our mindset, choices and daily actions?

Are our mindsets, choices and daily actions reflective of our love for Jesus?

Are our mindsets, choices and daily actions making full use of the gifts that Jesus has given us?

Are our mindsets, choices and daily actions making a difference in the world around us so that the light of Jesus comes through every time?

So today, as we wish one another a blessed Christmas and celebrate the birth of our Saviour, let us also take some time to reflect upon what each of us give birth to in our own lives. Perhaps this is a good time to grow our gifts, stretch ourselves spiritually, extend our giving and work a little bit harder at making the world around us a better place for all, because that is ultimately what Jesus died for.

In conclusion I am reminded of the final words in Peter's book, where he says:

"Always it is about bringing our individual or corporate consciences into conformity with God's dream of a world of compassion and justice. The single life-span given to each of us is our one chance to play a bit-part in God's long love story with the world. If we hold back for fear that our efforts can make no difference, we rob God."

I am reminded of the beautiful words taken from the hymn *Personent Hodie* which we sang at our Carol Service recently...

Advenisti mundo

Laudes tibi fundo

Ideo Gloria in excelsis Deo

You have come into the world

I pour out praises to you

Therefore glory to God in the highest!

Let us pray:

O God, who has made this most holy night to shine with the radiance of the true Light; grant, we beseech thee, that as we have known upon earth the mystery of that Light, so in heaven we may reach the full fruition of joys; through thy same Son.

May God bless you and your loved ones this Christmastide.

Amen.