

“Our present in our past”

Let me begin by expressing my thanks to your rector, Fr Derek Pratt for inviting me to deliver this lecture on the occasion of the 175th anniversary of St Paul's Rondebosch. I have to admit that when I actually realised to what I have agreed, I could not help but wonder at the invitation since I am no historian. Your Fr Pratt would have been a better choice, given his own interests. I still wonder but out of obedience have decided to reflect on this history which I have sought to describe as our present in our past.

I do have some slight connection into St Paul's having been Chaplain at U.C.T for the years 1988-89 at what was then Cambria, just below the motorway. Then the chaplaincy was apart from the parish, although I was sometimes invited to take services and on one memorable Sunday, close to the feast of the Transfiguration, a member of the congregation took exception to my support of those students who were involved in the end Conscriptio campaign and heckled me. But he was soon put in his place by a fearsome Paddy Wellman, who encouraged me to continue. Those were interesting times and our church reflected the divisions of our South African Society. And that is really how I have approached this lecture, it is not so much an historical account of the 175 years but a reflection of how our history has formed us and what challenges, therefore, it presents to us.

This year September 15 is the 30th anniversary of the death of Steve Biko. Like the untimely death of Chris Hani, one wonders what influence they would have wielded in our nation today and would we have this present political malaise. But these words of Steve Biko, from a series of articles under the title, “I write what I like” and which originally appeared in the East London Despatch challenged me. Steve Biko wrote, “A people without a positive history is like a vehicle without an engine”.

We as South Africans need urgently to unpack these words of Steve Biko because it does seem at times that we are like a vehicle without an engine with the daily events around the Ministry of Health being a clear indication of lack of leadership.

On the 5th of September 1832, the Bishop of Calcutta, who had oversight of Anglican Churches in South Africa consecrated this site on which St Paul's Church was later to be built. It has been interesting to discover that the Roman Catholic Church had a similar arrangement of Episcopal ministry being exercised by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Calcutta for the local Roman Catholics. This means that there were Anglican Churches before the consecration of the first Bishop of Cape Town on 29 June 1847 and next year we at St Georges will celebrate the 160th Anniversary of the foundation of the Cathedral with the arrival of Robert and Sophy Gray in February 1848. The Bishop of Calcutta was Daniel Wilson and I am grateful to a friend who provided me with both a photograph and autograph of the Bishop, a very imposing person who not only consecrated the land on which St Paul's Church was to be built but also confirmed about 300 candidates and held an Ordination. I also learnt, and it may just be coincidence or a reference to London that the Cathedral in Calcutta is also dedicated to St Paul. Here is another interesting note for us today, given our recent liberation from apartheid and that this policy was given theological justification by the Dutch reformed Church. For some years the Anglicans worshipped in what is now called the Groote Kerk and Bishop Daniel

conducted the first Anglican ordination in Southern Africa in that Church. So, we began with cordial relationships between our two denominations and we, certainly at the Cathedral, need to examine our present day interaction with the Dutch Reformed Church.

“ Our present in our past”.

Whenever we read historical books or papers we need to do so with a critical eye because so often the recorded history reflects the view of the victorious in battle and the successful in trade. Looking to find some background to the period of the foundation for this parish and admittedly, we would not use the same language if we were writing today and I quote from an Afrikaans three volume history, “ Drie Eeue - Die Verhaal van ons Vaderland”. “Three centuries - The story of our Fatherland” - edited by Dr A.J Böéseken (1952). The very title, “ The Story of our Fatherland” indicates the view of the writers since the fatherland is not the Netherlands but South Africa. The Cape had moved from the Dutch to the British rule and thus, the event celebrated this year in England, i.e the 200th Anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain and the colonies is pertinent since it was to effect relationships here also. The reference

in "Drie Eeue" reads, "Eienaars van slawe was bitter ontevrede oor ordanansie nr 19 wat slawewette wat vir Trinidad gemaak was, ook op die Kaap van toepassing gemaak het" page 151
Translation: "Owners of slaves were bitterly dissatisfied with regard to ordinance no 19 which made slave laws created for Trinidad applicable in the Cape as well".

Then there was ordinance no 50 which recalled the pass laws of 1809 of which Böeseke writes
" Oor die algemeen het die ordanansie blank en gekleurd op gelyke voet gestel" page 152
Translation : " In general the ordinance was to make white and coloured equal".

As regards the land which was consecrated here I am indebted to Mr A William De Villiers both for directing me to his book " Messengers Watchman and Stewards" and our conversation around the lecture.

There is reference in the Centenary book on St Paul's Rondebosch to the land having been occupied by squatters; then already some of the problems we experienced today with the movement of people, were apparent. In the book, "Cape Town; The Making of a City" edited by Nigel Worden and Elizabeth Van Heyningen the period 1795 - 1840 is entitled " A Singular Mix " and I quote:

"Between the end of the 18th century and the 1830s, Cape Town experienced major changes. From being a backwater of the VOC (Dutch East India Company) empire, it became the capital of an expanding British colony" page 88 and they quote Robert Semple, son of a Boston trader who observed in 1803 "... As yet the people of the Cape are only about to assume a character. They are neither English nor French nor Dutch nor do they form an original class of Africans but a singular mix of all together which has not yet acquired a conscience..." page 89

What is interesting from some of the drawings in the book by D'Oyly was how those from the working class mixed with each other irrespective of race although not actually living together. It is very likely that those who occupied this land were some of those referred to by Semple. Under VOC rule no religious practice was allowed apart from Reformed Christianity but this prohibition was removed in the early nineteenth century and by 1841 the record shows that there were 15000 Dutch reformed 4 200 Episcopalians (Anglicans) and 6492 Moslems. It is not known when the first Anglican Church was built but such development was soon to be undertaken by Robert Gray, first Bishop of Cape Town, who arrived here in February 1848. So St

Paul's is one of the Churches that both predate St George's Cathedral as well as the arrival of our first Diocesan - while called the Bishop of Cape Town, he was responsible for the whole Church in South Africa together with the islands of St Helena and Tristan da Cunha. A vast responsibility for any one person. In 1834 the first church was built on the design of Major Charles C. Michelle but that proved to be inadequate for the needs of the people and in February 1849, a year after the arrival of Gray, the foundation of his present building was laid to a design by Sophy Gray, wife of the Bishop.

Now in reflecting over the past 175 years there is more material on the Bishop's and Clergy than about the parishioners, those who worshipped at St Paul's. In conversation with a friend earlier this year, after the murder of David Rattray, he remarked on the wonderful ability Rattray had as a historian/storyteller to bring out the characters of both the Zulu and British soldiers in describing the battles which took place between the two groups, to recognise the heroes on both sides. My friend went on to say that during these accounts he brought to life even the traders not usually mentioned in an account of the battles. That is the kind of historian that I would like to listen to because history is not simply a record of events and dates but the story of women and men who lived then and especially the ordinary person who worshipped at St Paul's.

So returning to Bishop Daniel Wilson, who consecrated this site, I discovered that he was the son of a silk manufacturer and has been apprenticed to his uncle, also a silk manufacturer. When he studied at Oxford he had won the Chancellor's prize for an essay on "Common Sense" a quality which sometimes seems to be lacking in some clergy. He was consecrated Bishop of Calcutta on 29 April 1832 and en route to India he stopped to perform Episcopal duties. It is a bit like reading the Bible, we have references to various people whose lives seemed to have been significant and yet of whom we know so little. Two of the clergy associated with St Paul's in its early history were Canon Edward Judge and the Reverend Holt Okes. Edward Judge was in fact ordained to the Priesthood on 9 September 1832, in the Reformed Church, Cape Town by the self same Bishop Daniel Wilson, "...under special occasion for the Bishop of London." (De Villiers p119) Both Judge and others are referred to as "Provincial Chaplains" with Judge styled "Colonial Chaplain of Rondebosch" (1834 - 1840) Judge would appear to have been a very interesting character since he is recorded as having resigned from the S.A. College in 1830 " ... in consequence of a resolution of a Council not to allow religious instruction", and he also served as a member of the Philanthropic society for aiding deserving slaves and slave children to

purchase their freedom. The reason for my mentioning these names is to indicate the heritage which you have entered into here at St Paul's and reflecting on that past to ask what would be the views that would make you take a stand and what would be your gospel response to pertinent issues today in both our Church and our nation?

“ Our present in our past.”

Some years ago, when I was Chaplain at UCT, I was in conversation with some of your parishioners and learnt that there had been a church school within this parish and also, a branch of the Church Lads Brigade. In fact, why I remember these conversations was because I thought the persons were talking of St Paul's, Bree Street and, no they said, here at Rondebosch. So, when, I wondered did the removal of people of colour take place? Worden mentions an area called Fraserdale, whose coloured residents “the white middle class of Rondebosch and Claremont accepted... as a natural part of their firmanemant...” p. 256. There was certainly a time when I, personally, did not imagine neither St Paul's nor St Thomas, Rondebosch as anything but white middle class. Then this past Sunday I met someone who also attended the school and he told me that they had lived in “ kleigat,” on the other side of the river.

But where are we today if we are to take seriously our ongoing commitment to the ideals of those who sought to witness to the gospel and chose to place on this hill a building to the glory of God and a visible sign to all around that we are called to “...be like a city set on a hill which cannot be hidden...” and that the character of our lives must reflect Jesus Christ, whose witnesses we are in the world. I must add a personal note to my own experience from the perspective of a young ordinand and subsequently priest in the diocese of Cape Town. From my view point at the church of the Good Shepherd in Maitland, St Paul's seemed to have been one of what the Episcopal Church in the USA refers to as a “cardinal parishes.” Their rectors and also Churchwardens, were persons of note, the other parish being St Thomas, Rondebosch, St Saviours, Claremont, All Saints, Somerset West and St Mary's Stellenbosch. So the first rector here, who made an impact on me was Canon Halverson and it seemed that the rectors here were all outstanding preachers. There was also something of the quality of the worship although for myself I was more drawn to the liturgy of St Paul's, Bree Street, St Mark's, District Six, St Mary, Woodstock and St Luke's, Saltriver, a style of liturgy which seemed to engage all one's senses and whose witness went beyond the Anglican Church.

Today, we who have entered into this goodly heritage face greater challenges, in some measure to our founding mothers and fathers and in vastly different social conditions to those encountered here in 1832. The political climate has changed dramatically since the beginning of the 1990's and this offers new opportunities as we continue to live out the gospel. A German visitor in 1938 commented "...there are probably few cities in the world which, within so narrow a space, could show a greater variety of nations than Cape Town does." (Worden p89) but as recent articles in the Cape Times have revealed we remain a divided society and sadly, because of our past history, this is reflected in our Churches. Having shared together in Holy Communion, we go our separate ways, not communing with another until we come together in this building. To reflect on our history is not to look backward nor is it to burden one another with guilt, but we cannot deal effectively with our present until we embrace our past and returning to Steve Biko:

"A people without a positive history is like a vehicle without an engine."

The scriptures warn against crying "Peace, peace..." where there is no peace and we know that out of our Christian experience, reconciliation comes at a price - the Cross is our constant reminder of the cost of our redemption and our reconciliation with God and one another. At various levels both our diocese and this parish has sought to engage with the issues of our day and both of the clergy and the laity there have been those who sought, as our present Archbishop has said, "...to be the human face of God." For an Edward Judge it was to serve on a Board which assisted slaves to purchase their freedom. While we do not have slavery on a similar scale today we in South Africa are confronted with human trafficking and not far from this Church young women are being sexually exploited as sex workers. Then too, there is the challenge provided by your proximity to the University of Cape Town with its large student population and irrespective of their religious affiliations, or none, God has placed you on this hill for a purpose; that is before any student can ascend the hill to engage in higher learning on the campus, they must first pass this school of Christian discipleship where we are all together learners in the school of God's kingdom, the school of love. We are the disciples who proclaim to follow Jesus Christ who is the "way, the truth and the life..." and as such we are, through our baptism, called to sharing Christ who lives in us. 175 years ago today, Bishop Wilson consecrated this ground to the glory of God and the building of God's kingdom, today we are to celebrate our past as enabling us to live in the present and by giving hope to the future. The women and men,

old and young who have been part of making this tapestry would want us to continue by adding our stitches and to know that through it all runs a golden thread of faith, not our faith but God's faith in us. We too are consecrated to proclaim his love today as we face the challenges of poverty, indifference, corruption and violence the devastation of all sorts and HIV / AIDS. Only God's faith in us can enable to look forward from our past and step out boldly into the next phase of the life of this parish. Let me conclude with some words sent some years ago to me by some one who at times was part of St Paul's.

One Life to be lived
and only one.
And not what we gather
But what we give,
Is the measure to God
Of the life we live
And of work that
Is bravely done.

One life to be lived.
And out of the past
We gather our hope for
the future strife.
For today holds the
germ of tomorrow's life
And God keeps His best
till last.

(sent by Betty Mitchell)