

Sermon

28 July 2013 – with reflections on recent visit to Africa

I am preaching in the place of Canon Yolande who led our recent visit to Mpwapwa but who is regrettably unwell. I am sure that if Yolande was here, she would have begun with Bwana Asafiwe! which means in Swahili, Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord indeed for the church in Africa. All of the group from All Saints were richly blessed for our time in June.

I want to say something about our experiences using as pegs some of the verses in the Bible which we heard today in our Epistle reading and in the Gospel.

We heard in our Epistle reading, an instruction that Christians must lead their lives in Jesus, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, abounding in thanksgiving.

Greystone Park is an independent evangelical church on the northern outskirts of Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. The church has a substantial outreach to the community through the Michael Project, which runs a children's home, three pre-schools, including one in a women's prison, and a learning centre. In addition, through its Good Friends' project, it sends monthly parcels to many needy elderly people in and around Harare.

Helen Hobbs, who was a member of our church, and her husband David, are leading lights in the Michael Project. The church employs about 20 people to do the amazing work of the project. Liz and I were moved by the profound faithfulness and prayerfulness of all the people that we met at Greystone Park. Their love of Jesus; their easy way of talking about God; and their joy shone through everything they did. I am afraid to say that they somewhat put the English church to shame!

Liz and I came away from Harare en-route to Tanzania powerfully convinced that God had given us, and was going to give us, so many wonderful opportunities through learning from our friends in Harare.

I will talk about Tanzania in a moment. Tanzania has Canon Yolande as its advocate in our church community and so I thought that alongside other members of our church who have supported the Michael Project for several years, I would be an advocate for the project in the future. Liz and I have pledged ourselves with David and Helen that we will return to Harare. And later this year, David and Helen will be visiting us at All Saints so that I hope that many of you will have the opportunity to meet these wonderful people.

Faith and Thanksgiving are also hallmarks of all that we saw in Tanzania. Liz and I arrived in Dar Es Salaam to meet Yolande, Lesley and Tim Birse and then we travelled westwards on a long drive to Mpwapwa Diocese. Mpwapwa Diocese is a poor, rural diocese in the middle of the gigantic country of Tanzania. There is very little money in that part of the country. Our linked diocese of Mpwapwa struggles with lack of financial resource; months can go by when the Pastors are not paid. There are very few vehicles to get around on and repairing equipment is often impossible. Most of the churches we visited did not have glass in their windows. One of them was made of mud bricks. There was minimal seating in the churches. Yet, the joy and hopefulness of the clergy and people shone through wherever we went. People singing joyfully, rejoicing at what God had done for them and what God would do for them in the future. The people could ill afford it but their hospitality overflowed; on one day we ate three dinners! The churches are full. The Sunday Schools have many members as do, for example, the Mothers Union branches, all of which sing with great gusto! I could go on!

We also heard in today's Epistle that God had disarmed the rulers and authorities and had made a public example of them, triumphing over them.

I return to Zimbabwe for a moment to say that elections take place this week there. Please pray for all our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe at this critical time. We pray that the powers and authorities in that country will soon be imbued with a passion for justice and peace for all people and not for partisan advantage.

What came across to me very powerfully is that the churches operate almost like a parallel social service to the public authorities; not only plugging gaps in those services but providing wholesale services themselves. In that sense, God has already triumphed over the powers of authorities in that country.

In today's Gospel, we heard the Lord's Prayer, which of course prays that every day we will be given our daily bread. We also heard the story of the visitor at midnight; the house-keeper gets up and gives his friend whatever he needs.

I do not need to labour the point but in summary we saw a massive commitment to needy children, both in Harare in an urban or semi-urban situation, and in deep rural Tanzania. Through the work of the church, people are as it were 'getting up at Midnight and giving visitors what they need', even though they themselves have so little.

We, in the West, really ought to be ashamed; many of us, despite these years of austerity, continue to lead very comfortable lives, buying the latest IT, holidaying around the world, clothes, their houses, cars, school fees and so on and so on. Most of the people we met in Africa will never travel far and were they to see our lives they would be as uncomprehending as people would be if they were transported from Medieval Orpington to now. There is something very wrong in the distribution of resources in our world.

My last citation from our readings today is 'Ask and it will be given to you'.

What I want us to do is to ask God for humility in the light of the experience of the African church and to ask the African church to teach us about prayer, faithfulness and 'making do'. The African church should be able to help the church in the West to get its priorities right.

Bwana Asafiwe!