



Things Must Change

The theme for this Good Friday service is “Things must change”. Yes, indeed they should. Surely there can be no doubt that the violence and inhumanity of our world cannot stay as they are; that the lies at the heart of our society are destroying us all and cannot be tolerated; that the shameless clamouring for power is so abusive and cannot be allowed to continue to strip us of our dignity.

Yes, indeed. Things must change!

Is that not what Jesus felt? Is that not what he called for? OR is it? I don't recall Jesus saying words like 'things must change'; he talked more about 'a new birth', 'losing your life to gain it', 'a seed must die', 'give all you have to the poor'.

Diakonia – I think you have got it wrong. “Things must change” sounds too gentle for Jesus; it sounds too full of our own angst and passive hopes that someone will sort the future out.

What has happened that in South Africa in 2014, after twenty years of democracy, we are stuck in our angst, our fears, our inactivity, our silence; and we cannot hear the radical life-giving call of Jesus to 'pick up our cross and follow him' – not just hoping that 'things must change'? What has clouded our seeing? What has lured us away from our trust in the God of justice and love, so that we are left hoping that someone will 'make things change'?

I think we have succumbed to the temptation that Jesus himself faced; a temptation that rings true down through history; a temptation that is made so explicit in this year of elections. The temptation to trust in the “authority and splendor of the kingdoms of this world” (Luke 4:5-6). The temptation to trust that the powers of the world will make things right.

To hear again God's radical life-jolting call we have to *abandon our illusions, our idolatry, our trust in the powers of this world*. We have immersed ourselves in the illusion; we are enchanted by the myth; we have been deceived by the lie; that our redemption, our hope for change, lies with the powers of the day, the state, with worldly powers. Jesus' reply to this temptation, this illusion, this myth - “Away from me Satan, ... serve God only”.

Is it not true that for the past twenty years we have hoped that our new democracy in South Africa, that our new state, would deal with our past; would see that justice rolls down like a river; would give us the equality we long for; would restore our dignity and our land; would break out of the mode of racism that excludes the other; that the police would stop killing us.

But our hopes are dashed; our trust betrayed. Not for want of trying, not for the lack of good intentions. But Jesus made it clear when he was tempted - "Away from me".

We have too quickly put aside Jesus' response to this very intention from two of his disciples, when they requested to be seated on his right and his left and to rule with him. Jesus links his own death to such a request and states in Mark 10: 42-45: "You know that those who are recognised as rulers ... lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. *But it is not so among you*, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; ... for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Why are we so surprised at the greed, corruption of our leaders? Jesus knew that is what leaders do, throughout history – and he said, it is not so among you.

But it is not so among you, it cannot be so among us. It cannot be that our hope for redemption, for change, lies in the powers and structures of this world. It is not so among you.

For it is those very powers that put to death the human one, that silence the truth, that instill fear, that keep the order of the world. But it is not so among you.

We have allowed the massacre of mineworkers at Marikana to become just a tragedy; the killing of protesters to fade in our memories, the forgotten and un-numbered ones silenced by the state. It cannot be so among you.

We cannot simply buy the lie and hope that another election will sort us out; will make things come right; will make things change.

Good Friday, the cross, calls us to abandon our trust in the powers of this world, for in the cross Christ "has disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them". (Col 2:15)

We cannot turn again to the powers / the state / the experts; this is what Jesus rejected. Where do we turn? How do we hope after abandoning our hope?

When we find ourselves alone – facing the death of our hope, when the powers of the world have shattered us again; it is only through that painful death that we can know the possibility of a new birth. And so, Good Friday reminds us again that *we find our redemption in the death and resurrection of the body of Christ*. We find our hope in the love of God, not the powers of this world.

This particular Easter time is an opportunity for us to recall the "dangerous memory" of Jesus' confrontation with the powers. It is dangerous because it is the end of worldly power, it is the unmasking of the lie, it is the break with the world-as-it-is. The cross is the irruption of the rule of God in history; the ending of the sovereignty of the state and the powers of this world.

As the theologian Yoder states, "the cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to the kingdom, nor is it even the way to the kingdom; it is the kingdom come." We affirm that it is

not the principalities and powers that give meaning to history, but it is the cross that determines the meaning of history.

Things must change? No, that is idolatrous. Things have changed! Christ has died – it is finished! Christ is risen – he is our lord!

This is the terrifying truth, the BIG truth, that we find it so hard to live by. He has made a mockery of all other powers – then and today. This is the scandal of the cross, that first Easter and today. We no longer fear what the powers of our day want us to fear; we do not fear the death you measure out; we fear only Christ and him crucified.

That terrifying truth leads us to abandon all hope in the powers of this world-as-it-is. We die to that world, we end our illusions, we walk away from a system that says one thing and does another. We walk away and embrace the grace promised in that cross; the grace that is still open to all of us. For that cross is all about the love of God.

We remind ourselves today that Good Friday is followed by Easter Sunday, death by resurrection – the resurrection of the body of Christ. We rejoice that death is not ultimate, and that Christ lives on. Christ is risen! We are humbled that Christ lives on in the body of Christ – in the multitude of foolish and sinful people like us; in the midst of those who refuse to take their place in the world-as-it-is and have no interest in being servants to power; in the company of those who choose life and dignity, and not control and domination. As that body, we make Christ present by remembering those killed by the worldly powers – as we remember Jesus' death at the hands of the powers of his day.

So ... our theme suggested that “things must change”. It would appear to me that the message of Easter is that “things have changed – once, for all!” Christ has died; Christ has risen! The powers have been exposed and shamed. What then is left for us today? What is left for us is to make a choice – a choice to act on the change that has happened.

At this time of elections and having to choose, don't lose sight of the real choice. The political parties are making all their promises – jobs for all, growing South Africa together, economic freedom; there is even a very sincere attempt by some to register their disgust by spoiling their vote, and a call by some not to vote. Strength to you as you make your choice; but don't lose sight of the real choice to be made.

We must choose between placing our trust again in the powers of this world, the powers that wield death; OR we place our trust in the cross of Jesus and embrace the love of God; we choose to march with Jesus as he is found outside the camp, outside the places of power; we choose to place ourselves at the service of those outside the camp, amongst the least of these; we choose to name the truth of how the worldly powers have silenced and shot at those outside the camp.

Jesus' death and resurrection leaves no ambiguity. Things have changed – we must choose.

In this Good Friday procession we proceed to the City Hall to give expression to our choice. As you march, consider your choice.

Some might see the procession as a moment to bring our needs before the city officials; a moment of submitting our demands; an opportunity to say to the powers – things must change.

I will be marching to focus on the cross and what it has already done; I will join with the risen body of Christ in exposing the powers and saying “it will not be so among us”; as I take a flower it will be in remembrance of those killed by the powers in our young democracy; as I place a flower on the cross I will be remembering the body of the faithful and counting myself alongside those who take up their cross.

But the march is not only to the City Hall. We will commit ourselves as the body of Christ to continue to march away from the worldly powers and to serve; to serve outside the camp.

Christ has died! Christ has risen! Now choose.

Good Friday Service sermon delivered by Graham Philpott on the 18th of April 2014.