



Good Friday Service 2011 Sermon – Revd Sue Britton

The Cross of Transformation

Isaiah 58:3-12, Romans 12:1-2 & 9-10, John 19:16-18

Spirit of truth and judgement,
who alone can exorcize the powers that grip our world:
at the point of crisis give us your discernment,
that we may accurately name what is evil,
and know the way that leads to peace,
through Jesus Christ, Amen. *[Janet*
Morley]

Transformation is a powerful word. It means radical change, so radical as to be almost unrecognisable.

When we were at school we learned of the transformation of a wiggly caterpillar into a wonderful, bright butterfly. The butterfly still has the essence of what it was - a caterpillar - but its transformation makes it much more than it was, makes it become what it was intended to be.

Christ's willingness to be put to death for what he was opened the way to Easter - the celebration of the resurrection, the transformation of death into life, of evil into good.

As we gather at the foot of the cross, seeking to participate in the transformation promised by the cross, perhaps we need once more to reflect on the questions: what death? for whom? for what?; and to what life - once again, for whom? for what? What is death-dealing in our lives today? What is death-dealing for society, for the world? And what is life-giving?

What needs transformation?

Are we speaking of our personal lives, struggling as we all are with the temptations of consumerism, of greed, of envy and unkindness, of betrayal of those we love and the values for which we stand? Are these death-dealing?

Certainly we are all subject to such failings and weaknesses. But we also say that God forgives us when we confess, when we acknowledge these weaknesses and failures to God. God can forgive and transform us indeed.

But we Christians are not often willing or able to think deeply about the reality of evil in the world, and its root causes. It is difficult for us to analyse honestly what leads to the suffering, the trauma, the pervasive evil in the world.

The problem is that our accumulated human failings and weaknesses - let us call them our sin - in time create and sustain death-dealing structures in society that reflect humanity's apparently irredeemable greed, self-serving, injustice. And we can't easily see or make the connection.

The prophet Isaiah is clear. God does not seem to notice when the people beat their breasts and refrain from eating as part of their religious observances. No, says God through Isaiah: that's because you continue to act as the unjust structures of society demand; you continue to treat workers oppressively, you continue to be violent to the poor and helpless, you do not look and so you don't see that people are starving, are homeless around you while you perform your religious ceremonies.

Let us look for a moment at our communities, at our society, at our world. What is the transformation that the dying Christ calls us to be part of? What is evil in our world? What is death-dealing?

Besides being Good Friday, today is also Earth Day.

Most of us by now are aware of the important talks - called COP17 - that will be held here in Durban in just over seven months' time. Governments of the world will come together - as they have done yearly for the last sixteen years, with little success - to try and reach agreement about how to reduce the burning of coal and oil in the industries and transport systems of their countries. If agreements are reached, and then carried out, this would help reduce the global warming and climate change which is threatening the life of the earth. For we stand at a cross-roads. Planet earth is in crisis. The world is heating up even as we gather here. And we already experience the consequences: more severe floods, droughts and extreme weather conditions all over the world.

Who are being and will be most affected? Those who are poor - particularly those in low-lying areas, those living next to rivers and the seas from which they used to get their livelihoods, subsistence farmers in the ever-increasingly arid parts of the world where water is drying up or becoming too polluted to use, those in island communities as sea levels rise. The vulnerable of the world will be the most affected - those without the resources to easily move to another place. Food and water security are at risk for everyone, but inevitably those who are poor in the world are the most vulnerable.

But the world's greed for more and more, for the accumulation of wealth, feeds the need for oil and water. And so we are embroiled in struggles for power, in wars that have killed and continue to kill endless numbers of civilians as well as some military personnel - in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in West and North Africa, in Palestine. The greed for control over the exploitation of the world's last remaining resources, including its tropical forests and water, has given rise to an evil, death-dealing system - covered up and hidden under the name of big business, Western civilisation, development and free market capitalism.

And this system is heating the world towards boiling point, melting the ice of centuries, evaporating the water on which we all depend for our life, raising the levels of oceans so that millions will lose their homes and livelihoods, killing God's people and - if not checked very soon - killing life as we know it on planet earth, our only home, the place created by God as a most lovely and wholesome and life-giving home for us all, the home where God's intention is that we should live full and fruitful lives - all of us.

Creation is being crucified on the cross with Christ.

How can we play our part as we hear the cry of Jesus from the cross, the cross that can transform evil structures as much as it can transform personal sin?

First we must confront the death before we can move towards the life in all its fullness. We must take responsibility for the evil, for the crisis, and be willing to change. Transformation requires a radical shift in our deepest understandings of God, of Christ and of the power of the Holy Spirit.

The God we worship, the God of transformation, this is the God who came into the world as a human - as Jesus Christ - to show us God's true nature. And Christ's nature reveals a God nothing like that of many of the stories of the early history of the people of Israel.

Jesus showed us, not a God of domination and partiality to one group of people, the Israelites; not a God who assured military victory of one nation over others; not a God of violence and revenge; not a God of strict adherence to petty regulations and outward observances; not a God of war, of wealth, of greed, of corruption and of ostentatious consumerism.

Jesus showed us God's way of love, of justice for all and especially those pushed to the margins of society. Jesus demonstrated simplicity of lifestyle. Jesus challenged the political and religious structures of the time for their greed and hypocrisy, their focus on a small elite and their self-righteous oppression of the rest.

We will not experience the transformation of the cross unless we are willing to live the life of the Christ whose cross can save us. The early Christians spoke about the journey, called themselves people of the way, on the road. We too need to follow on Christ's way, to be willing to let go of all that hinders us, to be open to the way in which Christ's life, death and resurrection can work in us.

Transformation is not just about complaining to each other about crime and corruption and non-delivery of services. It is about discerning and then naming the evil. It is about accepting the awesome task of speaking out prophetically in the name of the God of righteousness, who requires justice for all people, particularly for those at the bottom of the pile, those who are poor, those who can't find decent work, those discriminated against because they are different.

Transformation is about people of faith participating fully in the life of our city, our province, our country, our world. It is about us requiring, even demanding,

accountability from those we elect to public office, and those employed by government to serve us - public servants as they are called.

Transformation is about taking responsibility for the future of our planet earth, our only home, by local actions to save water and fuel, to grow our own food, to prevent waste - and also by global actions to pressurize our government and the governments of the world to sign definite agreements at COP17 and put into place firm, measureable plans to carry out these agreements which could save planet earth as we know it.

Members of the shack-dwellers' association, Abahlali baseMjondolo, have a slogan on their banners and T-shirts. It reads: *'Nothing for us without us.'* For me, this slogan puts in a nutshell the way God works in us, with us, and in our world.

For God can do nothing for us without us - without our acceptance of the generosity, the vision, the insight and strength of God's Holy Spirit working within and between us, as well as God's gifts of initiative, of agency, of capacity, of deep compassion, warm love and personal integrity, of skill, of courage and strength, of hope, of life.

As we speak out on behalf of God who showers us with so many gifts, as we prophesy the unmasking of the powers of evil in the world, as we accept the burden of transformation, as we put our faith into action, as we work with God to renew ourselves, society, the face of the earth and its bounty, let us pray for the humility without which none of this is possible. Let us give thanks for the joy that comes from doing the will of God, however impossibly hard that seems. Let us hold hands with our sisters and brothers, our companions from every walk of life, our partners with God in the transformation of God's people, of God's world.

And let us pray that we may become what God intends for us to be, through transformation from death to life. Amen