

For what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord...

- 2 Cor 4:5

"Never place a period where God has placed a comma" is a saying attributed to one Gracie Allen that has inspired the United Church of Christ in the United States to engage in a sustained and comprehensive programme of Mission for several years now. The campaign is captured in the slogan "God is still speaking..." What this suggests is not only a challenge to the notion that God's activity in Creation was a once-for-all event, and since then God is no more active in Creation, or that the Great Act of Creation was completed in one fell swoop. On the contrary, it asserts the belief that God is still active, creation is an ongoing divine activity. God is not dead. But more significantly, it warns against then tendency to finish God's sentence for God, thus playing God.

But the slogan has other implications. It suggests that the people of faith are not aware of God in human lives, or that they are no longer listening, or if they listen they do not hear the voice of God, nor are they responsive to the promptings of the Spirit. It is a blessing to become aware that to this day God is being revealed as a Presence that is reassuring, as much as it did to Moses in the Burning Bush. But the voice of God is also a challenge: are we listening, or are we up to the task, or are we aware of our inadequacy and our need of God?

However one understands it, that "God is still speaking..." is a call to listen to God intently, and not frustrate God's story by interrupting with a full stop, when in fact, God pauses. We must not be unmindful of the pauses and breaks in the activity of Creation. The voice of God must be heard even above the din of human busyness, the still small voice in the silence or the morning breeze of the Garden of Eden, or in the tragedies of life, or in the natural disasters - in other words, in the ordinary commerce of human affairs.

Anthony B Robinson warns that listening to the God who is still speaking is risky and dangerous. It requires curiosity and courage, persistence and patience. It is about God rather than man; the speaker and originator of the Voice, rather than the Listener.

Paul attests in the Letter to the Corinthians to "this ministry" of listening to God - this calling to diaconal service, is not anything we have because we deserve or have earned the right to it. We have it "by the mercy of God." Second, he says that "this ministry" requires renunciation of the old ways, or the common tactics and approaches to power. It requires a commitment or the will to "live by the open statement of the truth... Commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." The central activity of this ministry is to preach, and the source and fountain of what we preach, is Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as servants for Jesus' sake. Ministry under Christ is bounded by servanthood, and effected through faithful service.

God is still speaking. Are we listening...?

The reading from St Mark's gospel picks up this theme of renunciation, humility and costly discipleship. The story is shocking to a Christian reader. Here is Peter making what we believe to be a true and profound confession: You are the

Messiah, - a discussion which Jesus himself had initiated. First, having heard the revelation, they are ordered to "tell no one about him." In other words the revelation was to remain a secret, and the Christ in their midst would remain unknown. The Messiah would remain hidden.

More shocking to the disciples is the description of the Messiah. Having tacitly, by implication, accepted the confession by Peter, Jesus goes on to define the Messiah in a manner contrary to the common understandings and received opinion. The Messiah would not be a powerful and all-conquering potentate, but a Danielic figure, the Human One, defined by powerlessness, and the inevitability of suffering. Clearly, to the disciples this was more than mere humility, and self-denial on the part of Jesus. It was a total reversal of fortunes which would, inevitably, impact on their understanding and teachings of the Torah. It became or could become a crisis of faith for them. What they had to learn is that the Human One was not just a critic of the powers that be, he was an advocate of an alternative society. The Human One is independent of the various alliance forces ranged against him. The Messiah was not to be an instrument for the realisation or restoration of Israel's political sovereignty. Shock, shock, shock! Surprise! surprise!

The second strand from this is the shock of the tit-for-tat rebuke, of censure, and the final put-downer: Get behind me, Satan... This sordid affair was, as it were, within the inner circle of disciples, but the teaching that follows, is shared with the disciples and the multitudes. In other words Peter had taken sides. He had placed himself in an opposite thought pattern to that of Jesus. The stinging or crushing rebuke was also meant for the disciples because we are told that Jesus "seeing the disciples" uttered the rebuke. Peter utters statements on behalf of and shared by the rest, and he receives the rebuke on behalf of the rest. The irony is that for Peter the Messianic personality is common knowledge and a shared expectation. To charge that "you are not on the side of God, but of men" may have been unfair. What it boils down to is that meanings had changed, and Jesus' idiomatic expression was truly alien and offensive to Peter.

To be a disciple was proving to be too costly. It means accepting the inevitability of suffering and making choices. The choice is "taking up your Cross...", equated to an identification with the rebels and outcasts, the criminals, unruly slaves. True disciples of Christ, it is now revealed for the first time, must subject themselves to being identified with social outcasts! Shock! surprise!

What was called for was to be of the same mind as, to be in solidarity with! And to share a common destiny. The one who was condemned must carry his own cross, hanging was public, grim and grisly, in a prominent, byway, perched on a hill overlooking the city, or at a crossroad. Death was slow, cruel and degrading. Such a death was a symbol of shame. There was no escape, because a path of least resistance would bring death, to proceed in faithfulness to the Messiah, would also bring death, but with honour. A person of honour would not concede to the powers of the world the sovereign right to execute and to silence. "To concede the state's sovereignty in death", says Ched Myers, in his Commentary on St Mark's Gospel, BINDING THE STRONG MAN, is "to refuse it's authority in life."

The disciples led by Peter get the shock to realise that God is speaking still.

The only way that they could extricate themselves from the Satanic Hell to which Peter had been consigned, would be by self-denial, renunciation and self-surrender, so that they could pray with St Paul, "Let light shine out of darkness" the prayer of Creation, to be created all over again in the image of God. The faithfulness of disciples of Christ in every generation, is "like a fresh Creation of the human race." God is still speaking.

I judge that the first duty of a disciple of Christ, is to Be Prepared - to be prepared for difference, diversity, and for a change; to be aware of the inevitability of change in discourse, as well as in meanings. A readiness to be shocked and surprised by God is the very essence of faith. In other words the unsettling thing is to realise that one does not have all the answers; that there are no certainties. We live in an ever changing environment. Leaders must live at times with the Cartesian doubt, and be comfortable that God's purposes are subject to continuous revelation. Knowledge is always liable to completion, and to be supplemented with new knowledge.

I do not understand 2 Corinthians to be projecting ready-made solutions, and off-the-shelf merchandise. The Gospel itself is true, and the faithful abide by the "light" of the gospel..." But that does not give one final and indubitable answers. The faithful find answers in their spiritual exploration, in their devotion, by asking hard questions, exploring new ideas, and new ways of understanding God, and by recognising the dynamism of the faith.

Second, leaders need to be both faithful and humble, be charitable and also pastoral. Leaders are not called primarily to become judges. I believe that a bishop exercises the function of "being gentle, yet merciful", justice with mercy precisely at the point where one's pastoral intuition are under test. A bishop should hardly be aloof and estranged from the flock, or imperious and hard. I venture to suggest that a bishop is called to be fair and just, ready to correct, but also to learn and discover, to err on the side of mercy in the conviction, as St Paul puts it, that the "transcendent power belongs to God and not to us..."

Finally, Jesus had been with the disciples in the alien Hellenistic city of power, privilege and hopelessness, Caesarea Philippi. The narrative takes place "on the way" between alienation and difference towards Judea and Jerusalem, the site of crucifixion and inevitable redemption. Along that way also the Christ was confessed and revealed, but also the Messianic secret was both disclosed and kept under wraps.

Strangely, Jesus now calls the "multitude with the disciples" and they together receive the discomfiting mysteries of the kingdom: if any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. This is radical discipleship. It is not just addressed to the select few but to the community of faith. It is no longer just a matter for the few but for all who have been called, to have the secrets of salvation presented to them "plainly", to commend oneself only by the "open statement of the truth." Discipleship is a shared responsibility.

Churches in our country, ours included, are struggling with credibility and the appropriate exercise of authority. We have far too much conflict and distrust,

and there are even cases where some people even go to the extent of going to the courts. In many respects it is becoming very hard to distinguish us as the elect of God. The politicisation of all spaces in our country leaves nothing to the "sacred", nothing is holy, all is contention and conflict and power. The purpose is to exclude all those whose ideas or manner of worship we do not like. Our bishops are to lead us to carry our crosses daily and never be ashamed to profess Christ Crucified, in many respects to become symbols of reconciliation to a world over-charged with conflict, or that espouses the alternative testament of conflict. Bishops should never be the causers of conflict. Reconciliation is part of their charge. And somehow we need to remind ourselves always that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor 4:7). The church is the craftsmanship of God. It is a thing of beauty. But it does need to be handled with care because it is fragile.

God is still speaking. We can no longer bask in our anti-apartheid credentials, nor our struggle record. The past at times is no match for the challenges of the present. We need new thinking, and new approaches to our new world. That is the hard lesson Peter had to learn. We shall and we must be judged by our kerygma, our public proclamation of Christ in our world today.

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N Barney Pitso
College of the Transfiguration
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Consecration Service for the Bishops of George and St Helena Cathedral of St Mark the Evangelist George Saturday, 7 May 2011.