

## Month of Mission 2016



# Month of Mission

THE UNITING  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH  
IN SOUTHERN  
AFRICA

### 1. Baby Jesus and Simeon

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:  
29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you now dismiss your servant in peace.  
30 For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
31 which you have prepared in the sight of all people,  
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:25-32)

*Missio Dei* - Latin for "The Mission of God"

For our UPCS Month of Mission we will focus on this beautiful idea that God does not sit comfortably at home and send us out into the mission field, but rather we find Him already at work in the world - way ahead of us - unleashing compassion and love in beautiful ways until He is finally recognised. And often all we are doing as missionaries is formally introducing Him to people who have already experienced His goodness and love.

Jesus' entry, life and death in our world is an ultimate expression of *Missio Dei*. Tomorrow Chris Judelsohn will unpack John's beautiful theological reflection on this great truth but this morning we will embrace Incarnation in a raw and practical way.

Picture it:

An old man, *righteous* and *devout* (ponder these two words)

Waiting for *the consolation of Israel* (he's deeply *hungry*)

God's Spirit is upon him - he's stirred up with holy anticipation.

There's fire in his old bones, there's expectation in his hungry heart.

Day after day he *longs* and day after day he *hopes*.

**And then** he wakes one morning and he knows: "today is the day!"

What was he expecting?

- A red sunrise, angel music and a light glowing from the temple growing in intensity as the angels announced the arrival of God and the consolation of Israel?
- Did he imagine the Romans fleeing from angels of fire like Elisha and the Arameans?
- Did he think of a pillar of fire and cloud like during the Exodus?

And so he waits in the temple and it seems nothing is happening...

And then it happens!

A peasant couple and a helpless baby.

And like thunder from a cloudless sky it dawns on Simeon.

God with us - of course!

The ultimate consolation.

The ultimate connection.

The ultimate love.

And so old arms and gnarled hands hold 3 or 4 kilograms of fragile helpless human flesh and Simeon knows - God is here! And God is love.

And he has peace.

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Theo Groeneveld is a husband, dad, and sometimes-cyclist. He has served at Emmanuel Presby Faerie Glen Pretoria for 19 years.

## **2.The Word became flesh**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John1:1-14)

Someone once explained incarnation to me in this way: You're in your garden and you see a line of ants marching along the pathway busily doing what ants do, when you notice that the sprinklers that have just come on and are causing a stream to flow along the path towards the ants. You want to warn and save the ants. You gesture and scream and even try and use your fingers, but to no avail. How do you tell them to move away from the danger? If only you could become an ant yourself and go and speak to them and warn them of the danger yourself and also tell them how much you care for them and what kind of person you are? If only...

God, who is so other, yet personal, comes to us as one of us (in flesh) and reveals to us, as best as we are able to understand, who he is and what we are called to do and be, and to offer his own life in order to break the power of sin and death and so save us from destruction, in this life and the next.

And, the very act of God coming in flesh reveals to us that God is a God of mission. God moves towards us. Indeed, he moves in with us. Eugene Peterson puts it well: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood." John 1:14

This was not a move 'up', into a nicer neighbourhood. One of the Church's earliest hymns, recorded in Phil 2:6-8, expresses this well when it speaks of Jesus humbling himself in taking on our flesh. A few years after the end of World War Two C.S. Lewis famously wrote that God moved into being 'enemy occupied territory'.

So, why then would God do this? Yes, as the ant illustration points out, to save us, but more than that, because he loves us! John 3:16 puts it plainly – "Because God loved the world, he sent his son..."

As followers of Jesus who form his body this means two things: Firstly, that we too are to move into the neighbourhood. As God's people, his church, his body, we are not to withdraw from the world. No! Like God, we must move into the world, even if it means going into places that are less desirable than those we usually frequent. God is a God of mission and so are we. Secondly, we do this, not simply out of obedience or duty, but out of love. God loves the world and, as his Church, so must we. Jesus was always found to be with the unrighteous and the sick and the outcast. Where are we to be found? God's mission is to move into the world and bring love and salvation, let's join him!

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Chris Judelsohn is married to Keryn and has 3 children aged 16, 12 & 10. He has served for the past 12 years at Midrand Presbyterian Church and is thankful to be part of God's life and work in bringing love, hope, truth, justice and healing to the world. He also enjoys playing golf and squash, although not very well.

## **3.Jesus and JohnB**

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew3:13-17)

John the Baptist (I call him JohnB) offered a baptism of repentance. He was related to Jesus (his mother, Elizabeth, was related to Jesus' mother Mary). JohnB knew who Jesus was - he had danced in the womb when pregnant Mary came to visit Elizabeth. He knew Jesus was the blessed one, the Messiah.

This is why JohnB balks at the idea of baptising Jesus. The baptism he offered was a baptism of repentance - a confession of sin and a new beginning. It was the same as proselyte baptism for gentiles who converted to Judaism. They became Israelites, were given new names, and their baptism date was considered their birth date and they committed themselves to God, to Judaism and the Law. When JohnB preached repentance and baptised people, they were acknowledging their need for God and their need for forgiveness.

JohnB knew that Jesus was the Messiah.

He knew that Jesus was without sin.

Baptism didn't make sense in His case.

But by being baptised, Jesus was identifying with sinful humanity.

(It's like taking a bath in someone's dirty bathwater.)

By being baptised Jesus was placing himself under the law.

His baptism by JohnB (who was also a sinner) signified the "Divine Exchange" that would take place on the cross - all of Jesus' righteousness for all of our sinfulness.

JohnB helps Jesus inaugurate his public ministry and mission in the world. In His baptism the die is cast: Jesus embraces our brokenness and connects to our humanity. From here on we see Jesus touching lepers, calling sinners, healing the broken and freeing the oppressed.

So, how did JohnB experience Him? John the Gospel writer puts it like this in John 1: "The next day John(B) saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"

John continues: "The next day John(B) was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, 'Look, the Lamb of God!'"

Who is Jesus?

What is He like?

JohnB is certain - "He's the One who came to take our brokenness and pain."

"He's the Lamb of God who takes the sin of the world."

#### **4. Jesus' first sermon**

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. 17 The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me

to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,

to release the oppressed,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, 21 and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke4:16-21)

I remember my first sermon. I was 19. It was on Genesis 3, the Fall. The sermon wasn't very good. Actually, when I read it now, it's downright embarrassing.

Jesus preached his first sermon in his hometown (like I did). At first glance, it looks like it was just as bad as mine. He starts by reading a sermon of Isaiah and then simply says: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Well, it very nearly got him killed. In comparison, my home congregation were patient.

When one looks a little more closely, the words are a lot more radical than any lame sermon I ever preached:

*Good news to the poor;*

*Freedom for the imprisoned;*

*Sight for the blind;*

*Release for the oppressed;*

*and the unwarranted, undeserved and unexpected release from debt that Jubilee brings.*

As I read these words again, I feel ashamed about how easily we (the Church) have watered down the radical intentions of Jesus. How far has the Church fallen?

The Church began as a liberation movement in Jerusalem, Judea, the Middle East and Mediterranean Europe. Persecution couldn't stop us. God knows they tried. Over the years, the Church has given the world gifts like education, health care and democracy. These gifts, for a tyrannical and violent world. The world is more beautiful as a result. And now, at best, we drink tea and talk about the days when the pews were full! The Word made flesh calls us to be agents of His kingdom, carriers of radical good news, freedom fighters, healers, those who seek fullness of life for all God's people. This is what a Missional Church is – the people of God involved in the world Christ died to save.

We are the Jubilee people – the recipients and carriers of the unwarranted, undeserved and unexpected cancellation of debt. We work for justice and fullness of life.

Now that is a sermon worth preaching.

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George the Meek.

George Marchinkowski is husband to Sascha and father to Leah (11) and Zoe (8). He serves the congregation of St Mungo's, Bryanston, and is committed to the development of Missional congregations in the UPCSA.

### **5.A man with Leprosy**

A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed. "If you want to, you can make me well again," he said. 41 Moved with pity, "Jesus touched him "I want to," he said. "Be healed!" 42 Instantly the leprosy disappeared-the man was healed. 43 Then Jesus sent him on his way and told him sternly, 44 "Go right over to the priest and let him examine you. Don't talk to anyone along the way. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy, so everyone will have proof of your healing."

45 But as the man went on his way, he spread the news, telling everyone what had happened to him. As a result, such crowds soon surrounded Jesus that he couldn't enter a town anywhere publicly. He had to stay out in the secluded places, and people from everywhere came to him there. (Mark1:40-45)

In keeping with the law in Leviticus 13 and 14, Jewish leaders declared people with leprosy unclean. This meant that lepers were unfit to participate in any religious or social activity because the law said that contact with any unclean person made a person unclean, too, some people even threw rocks at lepers to keep them at a safe distance. Even the mention of the name of this disabling disease terrified people. But Jesus touched this man who had leprosy.

Lets us look at this most revealing picture of Jesus.

- He did not drive away a man who had broken the law. The leper had no right to have spoken to him at all, but Jesus met the desperation of human need with an understanding compassion.
- Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. He touched the man who was unclean. To Jesus he was not unclean; he was simply a human soul in desperate need.
- Having cleansed him, Jesus sent him to fulfil the prescribed ritual. He fulfilled the human law and human righteousness. He did not recklessly defy the conventions, but, when need be, submitted to them.

The real value of a person is inside not outside. Although a person's body may be diseased or deformed, the person inside is no less valuable to God. No person is too disgusting for God's touch. In a sense, we are all people with leprosy because we have all been deformed by the ugliness of sin. By sending his Son, Jesus, God has touched us, giving us the opportunity to be healed. When you feel repulsed by someone, stop and remember how God feels about that person - and about you.

Although leprosy was incurable, many different types of skin diseases were classified together as "leprosy." According to the Old Testament laws about leprosy (Leviticus 13 - 14), when a leper was cured he or she had to go to a priest to be examined. Then the leper was to give a thank offering at the Temple. Jesus adhered to these laws by sending the man to the priest, demonstrating Jesus' complete regard for God's law. Sending a healed leper to a priest was a way to verify Jesus' great miracle to the community.

Here we learn about compassion, power and wisdom of Jesus in Mission. Be blessed with Jesus' special message on his mission to a leper.

Abraham is married to Rhoda, the father of three children, one girl Jemimah – 16years, two boys Gomezgani – 7years and Urunji – 3years. He served in Copperbelt Presbytery for 13years. Currently he's serving at John Knox congregation.

### **6. Calling Simon Peter**

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, 2 he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

5 Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.

7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. (Luke5:1-11)

The Month of mission reminds us that God is busy in the world. He calls all to come to his kingdom and have peace. Christ came and pitched his tent amongst us (John 1:14), to guide and lead us to the Father. This month is about the Kingdom of God here on earth and our role in its growth.

Peter, as a fisherman, was called to follow Christ in His mission to the world. There are four points that we get from this text:

- Peter was busy with his group fishing by the lake of Gennesaret, when Jesus got into his boat, he allowed Jesus to use his boat as a pulpit. He gave the control of his boat (livelihood) to the master. One cannot join in the Mission of God without giving total control of one's life to him. When we allow Christ to take charge of our lives, we put ourselves at the right place where Christ will be able to utilise us for his kingdom.
- Secondly, Jesus gives Peter an instruction to put out the nets in deep waters. Bear in mind, Peter was a professional fisherman. They had already done what Jesus suggested. So Peter indicates this fact to Jesus, BUT he follows the instruction anyway. When we are ready to allow the Word of God to instruct our lives, we are indeed becoming a fertile ground for God to operate through us.
- Third point. They caught a large number of fish. Christ's Word leads to a successful fishing. The church cannot fish without the Word and obedience to the master.
- Last point. Peter admits his sinful nature. God uses people who understand that they are sinful and need Jesus for salvation. Peter admits his sins and yet Jesus calls him to catch men. God is not willing to use people filled with pride. Our humility allows God to take total control of our lives. When the church is willing to admit its sins, such church is called to make a difference in the world.

Jesus calls Peter once these four points are met.



1. Peter gave total control to Jesus.
2. Peter listened to the instruction and obeyed.
3. Peter was willing to catch fish (stick to the mandate) and
4. Peter admitted his sinful nature and confessed his sins.

We need to be in step with the Word of God to be able to do God's mission here on earth. The Holy Spirit is always at work to equip and guide us. God needs you...

Lentikile Mashoko a father of three and a husband to Tumi. They serve at Mabopane Presbyterian Church, Tshwane Presbytery.

### ***7.The Call of Nathanael***

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."  
 44 Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. 45 Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."  
 46 "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.  
 "Come and see," said Philip.  
 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."  
 48 "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.  
 Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."  
 49 Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."  
 50 Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." 51 He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (John 1:43-51)

Jesus called Philip personally and Philip trusted Him and followed Him. It is so remarkable.

We do not know what kind of heart preparation Philip experienced; for usually God prepares a person before He calls him. We do know that Philip proved his faith by seeking to share it with his friend Nathanael.

John 21:2 suggests that at least seven of our Lord's disciples were fishermen, including Nathanael. Fishermen are courageous and stick to their job; no matter how difficult it may be. But Nathanael started out as a doubter; he did not believe that anything worthwhile could come out of Nazareth. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth and bore that stigma.

To be called a "Nazarene" meant to be looked down on and rejected.

When Nathanael hesitated and argued; Phillip adopted our Lord's own words; come and see (John 1:39); and come and dine.

Come is the great invitation of God's grace. When Nathanael came to Jesus; he discovered that the Lord already knew all about him. What a shock!

When Jesus revealed this knowledge of Nathanael; where he had been and what he was doing; this was enough to convince the man that Jesus was indeed the Son of God; the King of Israel.

His experience was like that of the Samaritan woman at the well.

When the Messiah came; He will tell us all things; Come; and see a man who told me all things that I ever did.

The revealing of human heart should also take place in the ministry of local churches / congregations.

Lita Madaka is married to Lungelwa

Blessed with two kids: ( Khanyisile and Linokhanyo ).

Currently ministering at Duff Congregation in Idutywa, Eastern Cape for the past 11 years. He likes jokes , he's too conservative and outspoken !

## **8. The call of Levi**

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, 28 and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. 29 Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. 30 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" 31 Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:27-32)

They say that eating together is a very intimate act.

The story of Levi in point form is as follows:

- Levi is a *tax-collector*. He was considered a "sellout" to the Romans, unclean for handling Roman coinage which had graven images on them and dishonest for keeping some of the tax for himself. He was despised by mainstream Israelite society.
- Jesus called him and he left *everything*. He left his way of life, his means of income, his grip on those whom he extracted tax from and his reason for existence. (Did you notice that Luke introduced him as a "tax-collector by the name of Levi" rather than "Levi who was a tax-collector"?)
- Jesus' call has such an impact on Levi that he spends money from his now finite pool of money on a "great banquet" for people on the rejected fringe of society. He wants people to discover the acceptance that he did when Jesus called him. He wants them to meet Jesus and so he does the best that he can - he opens his home, his piggy-bank, his privacy and himself to people who, like himself, need Jesus.
- The Pharisees are quick to criticise. They treat Jesus' behaviour as "fraternising with the enemy" but Jesus sees no enemies here. He sees people who need his love.

That's the summary. Now let's pause again at the key-moment.

What do tax-collectors and warm-hearted hospitality have in common?

Not much...

Until Jesus enters the picture.

Then we see a new Levi

- opening himself up to ridicule with the Pharisees
- opening his home, his heart and his piggy bank to others
- opening his life and story to others.

I can just see him beaming as his guests arrive:

"There's Someone I would love you to meet!!"

What about us?

When last did we open our hearts, homes and lives to others in the hope that they'd meet to One who has changed our lives?

## **9. Blood and Isolation**

And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. 44 She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.

45 "Who touched me?" Jesus asked.

When they all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you."

46 But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me."

47 Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. 48 Then he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace." (Luke 7:43-48)

Jesus came to seek and save the lost, to bind broken hearts and heal all manner of sickness and diseases. Throughout his life in ministry Jesus interacted with people from all walks of life. This

was made possible because he chose to be a missionary, he knew that ministry was where the people were. For Jesus people were his passion, he understood that his mandate was PEOPLE and nothing else.

Jesus had such love and care for people, when everyone else looked at the woman with the issue of blood they saw someone who was dirty and an outcast but Jesus was compassionate on her. The heart of a missionary is inclined to people regardless of the situations they are in. Jesus looked at the woman and realised that she had faith to be healed and he declared her healed because of her faith.

When Jesus interacted with people he always met their needs. He fed the hungry, he cast out demons, he brought wholesomeness and fullness of life to the woman who had been suffering and battling with the issue of blood for twelve years. Jesus also ensured that the outcasts were accommodated. This was a woman who had been rejected and left out in the arenas of life but she found refuge and solace in Jesus.

The people whom Jesus touched were never the same, the story of their lives changed, from outcast to accepted in the beloved. The woman with the issue of blood was totally healed and made whole, she was never the same. All things in her life were brought back to normal in her life.

Jesus encounter with people brought conviction to those who were not living right, those who didn't know God and his power got to know him. What a saviour he was to heal restore and bring joy in people's lives. Jesus never left people the same. Many testified of the power of God in their lives.

Jesus Christ is Lord over all and for all. Oh that missionaries with selfless hearts like Christ would arise and bring comfort to those that mourn.

Luke 4:18-19:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

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### **10. A Centurion**

5 When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. 6 "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly."

7 Jesus said to him, "Shall I come and heal him?"

8 The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9 For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

10 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. (Matthew 8:5-10)

In this passage, the faith of a Gentile centurion is introduced in a striking contrast to the unreceptiveness of the Jews. This man clearly showed his hopes were in Jesus Christ. This centurion was a Roman military officer in charge of about one hundred men, and was stationed in or near Capernaum. This man came to Jesus to seek healing for his servant who had suffered a violent and painful paralysis. This was an unusual display of compassion as most officials would not have shown such concern for a servant.

#### **How does Jesus Respond?**

Jesus Christ **responds positively with compassion** and offered to visit the sick servant. This is how Jesus Christ responds to us, when we approach him.



No matter how lowly your place and role in the society, Jesus loves you, Jesus didn't care that this was just a servant, He offered to help. You may never become great in the eyes of the world, but when Jesus Christ meets you, you will be valued by Him.

Jesus **marvelled at the faith of this Gentile**, when he showed the reality and depth of his faith. He had not found such great faith among God's chosen people Israel. When Jesus as a missionary responded to this man, He **affirmed** his faith. Can we imagine the joy and peace this must have brought to the Centurion?

### **When should we come to Jesus Christ?**

- In sickness of mind, body, or spirit, we should come to Jesus Christ.
- In pain and distress, we should come to Jesus Christ the Comforter.
- In dying we should come Jesus Christ the Life giver.
- In the uncertainties of daily life, Jesus Christ is still dependable and trustworthy, full of love and compassion.

### **How should we come to Jesus Christ?**

- Let us come in openness, simplicity and sincerity.
- Let us come in confidence and positive expectations.
- Let us come in peace and love.

### **Conclusion**

Whenever we surrender our circumstances to Him, Jesus Christ gives us all the attention and offers to help. This is something great we need to learn, in this month of October, as it is a missions month, let us get out there, represent Him, and offer ourselves to all those who need Jesus love, prayers and support, perhaps the distressed students and parents on this campaign "fees must fall"

Amen

Thembinkosi Nopapaza husband to Bulelwa, worshipping and serving at Johannesburg Presbyterian Church in Soweto.

### **11. Stretching Nicodemus**

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. "

4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John3:1-16)

Nicodemus represented the best in the nation. He was a teacher, a Pharisee, and **a member** of the Sanhedrin, the **Jewish ruling council**. The Sanhedrin were responsible for religious decisions and also, under the Romans, for civil rule.

Why did Nicodemus go to Jesus **at night**? Because of fear? Because it was the normal time for visits? Because he wanted a time of uninterrupted conversation without the distractions of the ever-present crowds? John did not say why. And yet nighttime has a sinister tone in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 9:4; 11:10; 13:30; 19:39).

Nicodemus began, **Rabbi, we know You are a Teacher who has come from God**. "We" probably means the favourable ones on the council. The titles "Rabbi" and "Teacher" are polite and flattering on one hand, but they showed Nicodemus' inadequate comprehension of who Jesus is. The words "from God" are emphatic in the Greek. The signs had pointed out Jesus as God's Man (God was **with Him**), and Nicodemus wanted to talk to Him as one Rabbi to another.

But Jesus was not on the same level with Nicodemus. He is "from above" (v.31); therefore Nicodemus must be born "from above" (v.3). To be **born again** or born "from above" is to have a spiritual transformation which takes a person out of the kingdom of darkness into **the kingdom of God** (cf. Col 1:13). The kingdom is the sphere or realm of God's authority and blessing which is now invisible but will be manifested on earth (Matt 6:10).

Nicodemus was certain Jesus did not mean something absurd (such as a reincarnation or a second physical birth), but yet he did not grasp the nature of regeneration.

Various views are given to explain Jesus' words about **being born of water and the Spirit**: (1) The "water" refers to the natural birth, and the "Spirit" to the birth from above. (2) The "water" refers to the Word of God (Eph 5:26). (3) The "water" refers to baptism as an essential part of regeneration. (This view contradicts other Bible verses that make it clear that salvation is by faith alone; e.g., John 3:16,36; Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5.) (4) The "water" is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39). (5) The "water" refers to the repentance ministry of John the Baptist, and the "Spirit" refers to the application by the Holy Spirit of Christ to an individual.

**Nicodemus asked... how** this spiritual transformation takes place. **Jesus** answered that Nicodemus, as the teacher of Israel, ought to know. The Old Testament prophets spoke of the new Age with its working of the Spirit (Isa 32:15; Ezek 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-29). The nation's outstanding teacher ought to **understand** how God by His sovereign grace can give someone a new heart (1 Sam 10:6; Jer 31:33).

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Victor Seperenkane Letuka husband to Maretheile Ester, father of two boys Botle, Thlonie and one girl Tshireletso, worshipping at Nqadu Congregation within the bounds of the Presbytery of Mthatha. I am currently serving as Treasurer and M & D Convener of the Presbytery. I am serving at Local Government as Employee Health and Wellness.

## **12. A paralysed man**

Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. 4 Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

6 Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, 7 "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

8 Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? 9 Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? 10 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." He said to the paralytic, 11 "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." 12 He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mark2:3-12)

Verse 5: "Jesus seeing their faith said..."

## JESUS RESPONDS TO AN ACT OF FAITH

An act of faith is an act of UBUNTU. I would like to make the following observations:

- **The paralysed man with no name had faithful friends.** They showed their genuine love for him. They were not happy with his state of paralysis. They believed that Jesus could heal him. They did all they could to take their friend to Jesus: they carried him up to the roof top, opened the roof and lowered him down closer to Jesus.  
**MESSAGE.** Get friends that will help you out of the state of paralysis, not those that bury you in a state of misery; friends that can bring you to Jesus for complete deliverance, even when your faith has collapsed.
- **Jesus saw their faith.** It appears that these many friends had had an encounter with Jesus Christ. While many doubted Jesus, the many friends stood out and believed as Lord and Saviour. Jesus as the finisher and perfecter of our faith saw and responded to their faith.  
**MESSAGE.** While individual faith is encouraged, it is good that we belong to faith communities, where we can see the concerns of our friends and do something about them. Hence, "we believe in the communion of saints".
- **Jesus gave the man the assurance of forgiveness.** It is not stated what sins the man had committed. It is generally known that the society of the time considered that disability was as a result of sins, whether personal or parents' sins. Jesus did not analyse the sins, but granted the assurance that they were forgiven.  
**MESSAGE.** Jesus undoes any negative description that the society gives to us. All sins are forgiven.
- **Get up, take you mat and go.** While the crowd murmured over Jesus' authority to forgive sins, he took it a step further to heal the man completely. Still, it is not reported that the man professed his faith. Jesus acted on the faith of the faith community.  
**MESSAGE.** Jesus came to bring healing, forgiveness and wholeness to us - individually and corporately, socio-economically and politically. The church as the faith community must lead friends without any discrimination to Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Our societies are broken. The church has to be **a life giving community**. In the words of Tiyo Soga, "**Bona izwe lakowethu uxolel'izono zalo**" (See our nation and forgive its sins), we should intercede for a broken and decimated people, so that they are made whole.

**Imbued with Ubuntu, we see the needs of others and help to get their unfortunate situation changed.**

Lungile Mpetsheni is the General Secretary of the UPCSA. He loves family and enjoys singing.

### **13. A man who is physically healed but not spiritually**

6 When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

7 "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

8 Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." 9 At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, 10 and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat."

11 But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.' "

12 So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?"

13 The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

14 Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." 15 The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. (John5:1-15)

We know the story of the man by the Bethesda Pool.

What is fascinating is to look at how persistent Jesus is in trying to heal the whole person...

Let's look at the man first.

The first clue we have to his brokenness is in the question Jesus asks him: "Do you *want* to be well?" Under normal circumstances this question would seem like a no-brainer. My response would probably be: "(With respect) Duh! Of course I want to be well."

But the man's response is telling: "There's no-one to help me..."

He takes no responsibility for himself. He has become *dependent* in every sense of the word.

The next clue we have is that when Jesus heals him and he gets into trouble for carrying his mat on the Sabbath, he doesn't celebrate the miracle, he immediately blames Jesus but can't identify Him.

The final clue to His brokenness is that when Jesus follows up with him, he rushes straight to "the Jews" (John's code for the Pharisees - (or the "religious mafia" as I call them.)) It is clear that the man's dependency syndrome is still in place and he decides to throw his lot in with the Jews by becoming an "informer" and betraying the One who healed him. He has remained a cripple in his heart...

(It's interesting that John gives us a mirror image of this man in John 9 in the story of the man born blind who, when healed by Jesus, stands up for him.)

But it is Jesus' love and persistence that grabs me here.

- Out of all the people lying at the pool, Jesus chooses this man, who turns out to be ungrateful and traitorous.
- Jesus, in His initial question to the man, indicates that he knows the man's deepest brokenness. Being well would mean taking responsibility. The man may not be ready.
- Jesus heals him anyway - the man is to have the choice and Jesus doesn't make it for him.
- Jesus follows up with him. He affirms that the man is well - that he doesn't need to be a dependent. But the man decides he'd rather be in the Jews' good books and so he betrays Jesus to them.

When we share the gospel with people, they still have their own choices to make. Sometimes, even when people experience the miraculous, they can harden their hearts. This should not deter us. It didn't deter Jesus. He continued to reach out and to follow up.

So should we...

#### **14. A blind man is healed physically and spiritually**

A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God, " they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

25 He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

26 Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

27 He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

28 Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! 29 We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

30 The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. 32 Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." (John9:24-33)

It's interesting to me that John dedicates this entire chapter to the story of the Blind man receiving his sight. If you get a moment today read the whole of John 9. Jesus encounters this man as he and his disciples are in Jerusalem. The disciples knowing he has been blind from birth ask Jesus – "Who sinned: this man or his parents?" The commonly held belief of the day was that disability in all its various forms was punishment for sin committed.

Jesus immediately turns this on its head, correcting their theology and pointing to how this encounter will lead to God being glorified. He then creates mud with his spit, puts it on the man's eyes and sends him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The man is healed.

As you can imagine this creates great consternation in his community and so they take him to the temple where he is harassed by the priests to account for what happened. Our reading today covers just some of what he says.

His logic is flawless.

-I was blind. Now I see.

-No ordinary person can do this.

-Therefore this man must be from God.

The second part of verse 25 is what strikes me most: "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

This man had at this point not seen Jesus with his newfound sight. Other than the instructions he had received from Him, he had no other previous encounters with Jesus that we know of. But through this one encounter everything had changed.

*"I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see..."*

I think sometimes as we grow in faith we lose the simplicity and wonder of that first encounter. That moment we realised that everything had changed. The moment we realise that we have been sought out by a God who loves us enough to reach out to us first. To love us first. To die for us.

I pray that this day you stop for a moment and remember with clarity what it was that made you stand like this man did and say – "One thing I do know...."

- One thing I know? Jesus cares enough that he encountered me.
- One thing I know? Jesus knew me enough to reach me where I was and continues to reach me where I am.
- One thing I know? An encounter with Jesus changes everything.
- One thing I know? People can encounter Jesus through me.

May we go into our day with clarity- knowing this one thing. And then may we have the courage to live as differently as this man did. *I once was blind but now I see.*

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Jackie Barker is serving the congregation of Emmanuel Presby in Pretoria. She is married to Tim and mom to Christine (2) and Jesse (7months) - beautiful children who keep her busy and laughing!

### ***15. A widow and her boy***

Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. 12 As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. 13 When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."

14 Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

16 They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." (Luke 7:11-16)

This current election cycle in the USA has exposed people to two candidates whom people struggle to believe. In our own country, politicians are seldom trusted to tell the truth.

Genuine faith is not dependent upon proof – in fact, any faith that requires proof is not faith at all. Certainly miracles are not going to make anyone believe, because, as with politicians and car salesmen and carnival hucksters, we don't believe what we are hearing or seeing. Miracles can be explained away. While the Gospels are full of miracle stories, Jesus himself denounces the generation that looks for a sign from him to prove that he is who he claims to be. Jesus never performed a miracle because someone demanded it. Jesus performed miracles because he was moved with compassion to human need. In this passage, the one in need was a woman whose only son had died. She would be sentenced to a destitute life, a life of servitude and begging, forced to depend upon the generosity of others in order to keep from starvation.



"What, or whom, can we believe?" is the question which many people ask in our postmodern world where knowledge is abundant but truth is obscure. The answer Jesus gives us through his interaction with this woman and her son is that we can trust and believe in the God who is always faithful. This doesn't mean we can predict or determine the outcome of God's actions in our lives – our God is not an idol we can manipulate to our own ends. It does mean that when we find ourselves with our back against the ropes, when we struggle for answers to difficult questions, when we don't know where to turn or whom to ask for help, we can trust God to intervene. We have to believe that God has the power and ability to bring what is good and right and true even from the most difficult circumstances. In the midst of difficulty, our task is to be aware of, to discern, what God is up to in our lives and in the corporate life of our community so that we can co-operate with what God is already doing and see the hand of God in the midst of our crisis. Maybe you find yourself in the midst of crisis today. Take a deep breath and ask God to show you how God is at work in your life and in the life of those around you. And then hand your crisis over to God and see what happens. Like this woman on her way to a funeral, you might be surprised.

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### **16. Water & Shame**

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." 25 The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." 26 Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he." 27 Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" 28 Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, 29 "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" (John4:4-28)

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, humanly speaking, should never have happened. A host of taboos - gender, culture, religion, ethnicity – reinforced by centuries of smouldering conflict and prejudice should have put paid to it. They were exact opposites: male, female; Jew, Gentile; clean, unclean. True to form, Jesus ignores all boundaries and barriers born of pride and prejudice

You know the story well. It's filled with paradox and pathos. Under the bright noonday sun she comes to the well. Why not at dawn or dusk like other women? We're discreetly left to draw our own conclusion. Is she a social outcast, damaged goods, a woman with a past? Such gossip didn't enter the conversation. His mind and heart were elsewhere. She might well be on the road to perdition. He would set her on the road to redemption.

This is the nub of her story. She comes, hears and believes. Seeking well water, she finds living water and so becomes the first woman evangelist in Christian history.

Seen through the lens of mission, several things about her story catch the eye. Not an ounce of condemnation in him. He sees her guilt and forgives it. He sees her shame and heals it. Not an ounce of patronising patriarchy. His attitude is liberating beyond description and sets the tone for all gender agendas to come.

Perhaps the most radical of all – he placed himself in her debt. He asked for help. DT Niles reminds us, "He was a true servant because he was at the mercy of those whom he came to serve... This weakness of Jesus, we his disciples must share. To serve from a position of power is not true service but beneficence." The Incarnation is at the heart of mission. A babe in a manger is the ultimate expression of kenosis on the part of the one who came to seek and to save.

Another cameo we mustn't overlook. He elevates her self-worth and affirms her dignity. He asks for help from her resources at hand – in this case a leather bucket which he did not have. Again DT Niles is helpful. Regarding the "technical aid" which the majority world often needs at the West's behest, he writes, "Essentially the missionary must come as a bearer of the Gospel. When [they] do, they will be both giver and receiver... and all their other gifts will find their proper place." Her story has so many facets. Too many to tell in this brief telling. It ought to be our story too.

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Alan Cameron. Teaching Elder at Trinity Lynnwood. Seeking to serve through vulnerable grace. Husband to Cecile, father of three young adults.

### **17. A sinner and a Pharisee**

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, 38 and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. 39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is--that she is a sinner." 40 Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. 41 "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. 44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." 48 Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." (Luke 7:36-48)

Jesus saw people differently and invited a prejudiced man called Simon to change the way he looked at people. The same invitation and challenge presented to Simon back then is presented to all the followers of Jesus throughout all generations since then.

"Do you see this woman?" Jesus asked. Simon would not even see or allow contact with the woman who was a 'sinner' in his eyes. After all she had a bad reputation in society. In fact Simon expected anyone close to God to shun this woman. For Simon, Jesus was disqualified from being a prophet because he allowed the same woman to touch him. Simon was prejudiced by a sense of his own goodness and his perception of the woman as a sinner.

Ironically Simon had failed the basics of being a good host to Jesus whom he had invited to his house. He completely missed the point that he was breaking God's command to 'love your neighbour as yourself' recorded in Leviticus 19. Instead of being a good host and loving he held a grudge against Jesus because Jesus accepted a 'sinner.' He hated Jesus because Jesus had done the loving thing of accepting another person. Many followers of Jesus still struggle to allow the love of God to overcome their self-righteousness.

All along Jesus knew the prejudice which clouded Simon's mind. In spite of such knowledge Jesus still accepted the invitation to eat at Simon's house. So often in life we are tempted to let our knowledge of other people's weaknesses become a reason for not having fellowship with them. We avoid going to people's houses simply because they exhibit a disdain towards us or because we suspect that they are too conservative or too liberal or something else different from us. Jesus let the love of God determine his interaction with Simon. With Jesus the last word belongs not to Simon's lack of hospitality nor his disdain for his guest but to the grace of God.

The 'sinner' whom Simon would not even see, let alone accept becomes the heroine in Jesus' kingdom. She knew love. In this life we all have weaknesses or we are all indebted to God and yet God does not hold that against us. Instead, God gives us unmerited acceptance and loves us in spite of our failures. She therefore gives the appropriate response of loving and giving dignity to another human being. She had been accepted freely so she loved freely. Jesus invited Simon and us all to realize that we are all loved in spite of our weaknesses. In realizing this love we are to become a refreshing, dignifying and peaceful presence for others.

(Paul Neshangwe who is currently serving Makokoba Presbyterian Church in Bulawayo, is married to Lydia and the two of them were blessed with two sons Tadiwa and Melusi. Paul loves being a friend.)

### **18. A man in the grip of great evil**

They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes, which is across the lake from Galilee. 27 When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" 29 For Jesus had commanded the evil spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places.

30 Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"Legion," he replied, because many demons had gone into him. 31 And they begged him repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss.

32 A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into them, and he gave them permission. 33 When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned....

38 The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39 "Return home and tell how much God has done for you." So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him. (Luke8:26-39)

Firstly, demons have three things in common: They destroy their victims, their victims feel captivated in their situation, and their victims are disconnected from the normal life of the general community. He didn't live a normal life, he was separated from normal living and prohibited from becoming what God intended him to be. Demons may express themselves through mental illnesses, schizophrenia, paranoia, addictions, obsessions, destructive habits. In Mark's version he was "bruising himself with stones", no one could bring him under control, even with chains. Though the demoniac recognized Jesus as "Son of the Most High God," but he could not free himself. These kind of spirits need to be exorcised.

Secondly we equally need to know that demonic violence may refer to violent, oppressive and corruptive systems/"empires" of the world that must be overcome to bring healing and liberation to the world. Jeffrey Johns says "*The miracle story is not just about a personal exorcism. It is about the promise of God's ability to defeat and re-order the disordered powers that afflict individuals and communities*" The demoniac called "Legion," referring to a company Roman soldiers. This strongly suggests that the violent possession of the demoniac refers to the acts of Roman oppression. Demonic possession is a symbol of the oppression of the frail by the powerful. The exorcism breaks the demonic curse that keeps the weak under the dominant violent power of the oppressor. As we see the pigs running toward the lake, we see that even the most violent systems cannot withstand the liberating power of God in Jesus the Christ. This is the same dynamic power that calmed the violent Sea the previous night.

Thirdly, the exorcism of the demons shows that in Christ we will overcome and depose the chaotic and violent systems of the Empires that continue to destroy the lives of the powerless. In Psalm 65:7-8 the psalmist praises God for his power to calm the seas (the metaphor for chaos) and to overcome the power of the violent Empires who were a threat to Israel. The exorcism of the

Gerasene Demoniac and the calming of the sea reveals the power of Jesus and his authority to liberate the powerless from oppression by the violent systems of the Empires.

This devotion comes at the time when our students demand free education in their life time. The inability of the government to respond to their demand has resulted in destructive behaviours on the side of the students and security forces. The delay by the government makes the students feel trapped. The violent systems of the Empires leaves the victims violent and in turn the victims are condemned for their actions and are seen to be dangerous and unreasonable.

May the church be encouraged by recognising the hope of Jesus' power and authority as Paul describes it in Ephesians 1:18-23 and be the liberating church that He called us to be.

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Mukondi is the immediate past-Moderator of the UPCSA. He enjoys ministering to the poor, he loves touring, sports specifically soccer and boxing. He loves reading, listening to traditional and African gospel music.

### **19. A desperate dad**

A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18 Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

19 "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

21 Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. 22 "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

23 "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

28 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

29 He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer." (Mark9:17-29)

Here is a story of Jesus Christ casting out the demons out of a child. We observe Jesus' return to his disciples, and the confusion he finds them in. He came at a time, when the disciples were embarrassed and run a-ground; the scribes, who were sworn enemies both to him and them, had gained an advantage against them. A child possessed with a devil was brought to them, and they could not cast out the devil - the scribes therefore insulted and teased them, and were to an extent triumphant. He found the scribes questioning them, in the audience of the multitude.

The case which perplexed the disciples, brought before him.

He asked the scribes, who, he knew, were always bothersome to his disciples, and teasing them upon every occasion, "What question ye with them? What is the quarrel now?" The scribes made no answer, for they were baffled at his presence; the disciples made none, for they were comforted, and now left it all to him. But the father of the child opened the case.

The terrible condition that the child was in, when he was brought to Christ, and the sad representation the father made of it.

When the child saw Christ, he fell into a fit; as if the devil would set Christ at defiance, and hoped to be too hard for him too, and to keep possession in spite of him. The child fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming. Put in other words - that the devil raged, and had so much wrath, because he knew that his time was short. Christ asked, How long since this came to him? And, it seems, the disease had been with him since childhood. The father was desperate as he narrates pressing instances to Christ in pleading for a cure; The leper was confident of Christ's power, but put an if

upon his will; This poor man referred himself to his good-will, but put an if upon his power, because his disciples, who cast out devils in his name, had been non-effective in this case. Thus Christ suffers in his honour by the difficulties and follies of his disciples.

The answer Christ gave to his address;

The profession of faith which the poor man made here; He cried out, "Lord, I believe; I am fully persuaded both of thy power and of thy pity; my cure shall not be prevented by the want of faith; Lord, I believe." He adds a prayer for grace to enable him more firmly to rely upon the assurances he had of the ability and willingness of Christ to save; Help thou my unbelief.

And in Christ he finds compassion, deliverance and peace...

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The Rev Armando Sontange is married to Shumikazi. Armando has a blessed calling indeed:

Shumikazi calls him Honey

Kwezi, Litha and Khanyo call him Dad

Mithali and Oyama call him Grand Dad

The folks at Kagiso Presbyterian Church call him their Moruti and preacher

And God calls him His.

*Not bad Huh??*

## **20. Bartimaeus**

(MSG) They spent some time in Jericho. As Jesus was leaving town, trailed by his disciples and a parade of people, a blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, was sitting alongside the road. When he heard that Jesus the Nazarene was passing by, he began to cry out, "Son of David, Jesus! Mercy, have mercy on me!" Many tried to hush him up, but he yelled all the louder, "Son of David! Mercy, have mercy on me!" Jesus stopped in his tracks. "Call him over." They called him. "It's your lucky day! Get up! He's calling you to come!" Throwing off his coat, he was on his feet at once and came to Jesus. Jesus said, "What can I do for you?" The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." "On your way," said Jesus. "Your faith has saved and healed you." In that very instant he recovered his sight and followed Jesus down the road. (Mark10:46-52)

They say that there is no one as blind as he/she who will not see. In this story, we are presented with a man who was absolutely blind. Bartimaeus could see nothing with his physical eyes, but he could see things on a spiritual level that others were blind to. This man was blind physically, but he had 20/20 spiritual vision.

When Jesus called, Bartimaeus got up to go. The Bible says that he threw his coat down. This means that he took off his outer coat and jumped up to go to Jesus. Bartimaeus' coat was possibly his most valuable, if not only possession. He must have known that someone else could easily pick it up and carry it away. He must have known that he could have lost it and this man would not have had the means to replace it. However, he counted the cost, threw down everything he had, and was willing to pay whatever price was necessary just to get to Jesus.

Bartimaeus frantically called to Jesus because he recognised who Jesus was; the merciful Son of David. He was excited to be in the presence of the One who mercifully healed and worked in even the most seemingly impossible situations. Heal a blind man? Make him see? Bartimaeus had little doubt. He knew Jesus could heal him. What is our heart's attitude when we approach our Saviour during difficult or traumatic times in life? Do we doubt his care, mercy and ability to work for our good, or do we have the confidence of Bartimaeus when we call out, "Son of David! Mercy, have mercy on me!"

One day a Christian and a Communist were sitting on a park bench watching the world go by. As they watched, a poor, drunken beggar walk by dressed in rags. The Communist pointed to the beggar and said, "Communism would put a new suit on that man!" To which the Christian responded, "Maybe so, but Jesus Christ can put a new man in that suit."

When Bartimaeus came to Jesus, he was asked a very important question and his response was one of pure faith. He trusted Jesus to heal him and then, the impossible happened; the blind man received his sight and was restored to wholeness at the word of Jesus. We need to understand that when Jesus healed him, the phrase literally means, "has saved you". Bartimaeus got far more than physical healing that day; he also got spiritual healing as well.



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Ruth Armstrong, runner, wife to Warren, mother to Lia, Sarah and Noah and minister at St Andrews Germiston.

### ***21. Money-changers aka space-invaders***

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves,<sup>16</sup> and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. <sup>17</sup> And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

<sup>18</sup> The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. (Mark 11:15-18)

Often Christians point to this piece of scripture to backup their disapproval when there is a decision to sell doughnuts after church on a Sunday morning or Christians will refer to this scripture when there is a debate about getting angry and whether righteous anger is acceptable. Is there more here? How does this account point to Jesus and his missional interaction with people?

As I read over this I am struck again by the passion that Jesus has for what is right. These people had **INVADED** the **SPACE** that they should not have been in and Jesus steps up and stands up with a passion for what is right that we do not often see in his ministry. When you think of "gentle Jesus meek and mild" this isn't the first scripture you may be drawn to.

After this display of passion we see Jesus teaching on the importance of prayer. He highlights that this prayer, that takes place in his house, is for the nations. The prayer inside his house is directed to the nations, to the world.

We also see that the chief priests and the teachers of the law felt threatened because the people were amazed. The people were taken by this new teacher and his message. This is still true today. When people are challenged by the power of God and the good news of Jesus Christ they are still amazed.

What can we take away from this? It might be good to ask yourself what are you passionate about in God's kingdom? Are you passionate about things outside the church? (We are often too passionate about things in the church that do not accomplish the mission of Jesus – "To go and make disciples"). You may also need to ask what are the space-invaders that are invading your relationship with Jesus? What space-invaders are distracting you from the mission of Jesus? Do you spend time praying for missions? Praying for the lost in our world?

As we become passionate about Jesus and his mission we must be drawn to our knees in prayer and then we will see people amazed at the message of hope and salvation that comes when the world encounters the cross of Jesus Christ.

If you were wondering – sell the doughnuts and it's fine to get angry just do the right thing with your anger.

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Brian Smith, husband to Lana and father to Caleb and Jayden. Minister at Hillcrest Presbyterian Church, KZN.

### ***22. Not far...***

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" <sup>29</sup> "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' <sup>31</sup> The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

<sup>32</sup> "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. <sup>33</sup> To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and

sacrifices."

34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions. (Mark 12:28-34)

Most of Jesus' interactions with the Scribes are hot debates, but here Jesus speaks to the scribe with a tone of affection and he tells him "you are not far away from the kingdom of God".

Let us examine some key elements of this encounter.

1. THE SCRIBE. The scribes combined a scientific and technical knowledge of Hebrew laws and scriptures, skilfully expounding them to the common people. They were the teachers of their countrymen. Holding the key of knowledge, they were charged with the duty of unlocking the written word.

Unfortunately they tended to narrowness, exclusiveness, tradition and the official. But there's something different about this Scribe. We should remember that the other Scribes were looking for opportunities to trap him: when they asked questions it was not for knowledge but to put Jesus in trouble with the authorities or to accuse him of not keeping the law. This Scribe is different. He comes because his last encounter with Jesus was answered well. Unlike the others, he is really searching for answers. Jesus finds this lawyer to be an intellectual who answers wisely. Because of this Jesus declares that he is not far from the kingdom.

2. THE KINGDOM OF GOD. What does it mean? This is the phrase that Jesus uses often in his teachings. The Kingdom is the rule of God, whether in the human heart or in society. It exists now, but it has its full realisation in eternity. Some have to seek and gain it. Those who have gained it have to labour to retain it, and this retaining may be regarded as winning it. It is to be noted that Christ Himself never gave any definition of the Kingdom, and perhaps it is not wise for us to attempt to do so...

3. NOT FAR. What the Lord observed in reference to the man was the intelligence displayed by his answer. It was shown not only in accepting the Lord's judgement as to the two primary commandments, but in detecting the principle on which the judgement rested: the superiority of moral over ritual obligations. Distance from the new Kingdom is measured neither by miles, nor by ceremonial standards, but by spiritual conditions. The man was to some extent intellectually qualified for admission to the Kingdom; certainly he grasped one of its fundamental principles. What is it that made this man "not far from the kingdom of God"?

1. A nearness that is brought about by intellectual sincerity.
2. A nearness to personal godliness that is brought about by moral integrity and conscience.
3. A nearness to personal godliness that is brought about by ceremonial faithfulness. A true inclination and susceptibility of soul are developed by a right use of the Divinely appointed means and channels of grace.

It's good to have this kind of an attitude but it's not enough to be near and not inside or part of the kingdom.

Christopher Mkandawire is a husband to Rhoda married for 19 years, blessed with three children and minister for David Livingstone Memorial Presbyterian Church for the past 18 years.

### **23. Stones & Victimisation**

At dawn Jesus appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman,

where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:2-11)

Jesus, God's missionary, his own Word who became flesh to reach out to us and to everyone who acknowledges the need for a relationship with their Creator and Redeemer, once again deals with the reality of human need and pain when he met the "*woman caught in adultery*".

The circumstances are shockingly cruel and corrupt. The teachers of the law used her as bait to set a trap for Jesus in order to accuse him of being in defiance of the law of Moses.

They have no compassion and have no consideration for the salvation of this woman. The man who was involved, is not even mentioned, as if one could commit adultery on your own. Harsh politicking and complete lack of compassion see a person in spiritual need abused and left with no care or concern by her religious teachers.

Jesus represents the complete opposite of such vindictiveness in this narrative and is clearly revealed as the Pastor of sinners, the Friend of those who suffer as a result of heartless underhanded agendas and the Answer to the ultimate need of the destitute, downtrodden and marginalised.

He does not defy the law of Moses, but he does resist the self-righteous agenda of the religious teachers: "*Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her*" he said to them, and when they all left without an answer to this challenge of Jesus, we hear the Saviour's voice setting her free through forgiveness and through positive instruction when he said "*neither do I condemn you*" and "*go now and leave your life of sin.*"

The Jesus we meet in this narrative reminds me of the word of Paul in 1 Tim 1: 15: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst."

He still uses "the worst" – you and I, to reach out to all, including the scandalised and exploited, to allow the Word of forgiveness and renewal to become flesh in all circumstances.

When reading this story, I simply want to join the hymn writer in exalting such a Saviour when the poet says:

*Jesus! My Shepherd, Saviour, Friend,  
my Prophet, Priest and King.  
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,  
accept the praise I bring.*

---

Andries Combrink pastors Centurion West Presby Church since 2004, is married to his ultimate support in ministry, Marthie, and has three adult children and a granddaughter, Hannaleen, who is in grade 5.

#### **24. Grieving Sisters**

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was less than two miles[a] from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

24 Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

27 "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

28 After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." 29 When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

31 When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

32 When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said,

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 34 "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

35 Jesus wept. (John 11:17-35)

This is one of those stories that can be read in different ways depending in which character's shoes you are standing.

Step into Mary and Martha's shoes. There is a huge crisis. Lazarus is dying. Jesus is called but He doesn't pitch. Silence. Lazarus dies and Mary and Martha's lives are shattered. They have to face the unexpected and uncomfortable fact of Jesus' absence.

Someone once said to me bitterly: 'Your Jesus promises more than He delivers.' Jesus wasn't there for him when he needed Him most. I suspect Mary and Martha would have understood. Sometimes Jesus' absence can be brutal.

Now step into Jesus' shoes. He knows the urgency of the situation. He knows all things; the end from the beginning. He knows His absence will raise questions but He carries nevertheless. Though hidden from Mary and Martha's understanding He remains in command. His absence is not His forgetfulness. His delays are not His omissions. His silence is not His apathy.

We know how the story unfolds. Lazarus' life is restored, and among the things we learn is the deep paradox: the absence of the presence of Jesus was in reality His presence in the void of His absence.

Think about that and remember, when Jesus says, 'I am with you', He really means it.

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Bio: James is a storyteller, an amateur historian and a compulsive walker.

## ***25. Zacchaeus***

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." 6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.' "

8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." (Luke 19:1-10)

The encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus is a spontaneous one. Jesus is passing through Jericho and notices Zacchaeus in a tree. Jesus does not ask Zacchaeus if he can lead him through the sinner's prayer but instead asks Zacchaeus if he can be his guest. It is the simple things like the spontaneous fellowship, the compliments about the tasty meal and the freedom to laugh together that touch Zacchaeus.

The moment of change comes when Zacchaeus, the short, stunted man stands up (v.8) and attains his full stature and personality. A comparison of Zacchaeus before standing up and after standing up results in the following contrasts:

1. Having been stingy rich; he becomes generous, offering half his belongings to the poor.
2. Having taken advantage of people financially through his position as tax collector; he becomes a source of healing and restoration by offering to pay back up to 4x.
3. Having been an outcast of society and reduced to climbing trees like a monkey; his human dignity is restored and is welcomed into God's family as a child of Abraham.

This encounter takes place shortly before Jesus arrives in Jerusalem where he is to die and then resurrect (stand up) from the dead. The moment when Zacchaeus "stands up" in the presence of

Jesus is a prefiguring of the transforming power of the resurrection which takes that which is worthless and lifeless and liberates it to attain its full stature as intended by God. Zacchaeus can now stand tall and become the person God intended him to be.

May we see in the resurrection not only a singularly great event of 2000 years ago, but may we be part of the resurrection in our daily lives and in simply ways by offering a hand of friendship to people so that they can "stand up" from whatever causes them to be crushed down and unable to attain their God given stature. Stunted, devious and people who feel cast out are all around us. As we pass by, may we notice the Zaccheus that God has put in our path.

*"Lord, you commanded us to love; thank you that opportunities to love are all around us every day. Amen"*

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Eddie Germiquet is Ministry Secretary of the UPCSA and is married to Lauren and together they have 4 grown up children.

### **26. Not all were grateful (but did they need to be?)**

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance 13 and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" 14 When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. 15 One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. 16 He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him--and he was a Samaritan. 17 Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? 18 Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well. (Luke 17:11-19)

When I was in primary school I got into trouble with my British schoolteacher for not saying "thank you" when she handed me a book. She said I had no manners. But if my mother were present she would have been proud of me. The reason is that in my culture a child may say thank you, not with words, but with the action of clapping hands and curtsying before taking a gift. These two gestures communicate both the gratitude and humility of the receiver. Unfortunately for me, my teacher did not know this.

Of the ten lepers that Jesus healed, only one came back to show gratitude. My mind is shocked at the audacity of the nine who didn't come back to give thanks! They didn't have the cultural excuse that I had in primary school. In fact, they had no excuse at all after being healed of the most incurable, stigmatizing and ostracizing disease of their time!

God sends us to go and minister to the world around us in some meaningful ways.

But -

- Not all whom you serve are grateful.
- Not all in your own family or community say the simple words thank you.
- Not all in your congregation recognize you for what you do.
- Not all your fellow workers ever acknowledge the gifts you share with them.

But do they need to be grateful? One most shocking aspect of the story of the lepers is that Jesus had compassion on them all and healed them, ***including the nine 'non-thankful ones'!*** The leper who returned to show gratitude to God was a foreigner. Surely the nine were the right people deserving the healing and therefore didn't need to be grateful? In any case, they had not been commanded to show gratitude to Jesus, but to show themselves to the priest according to the law, which they did.

Like the people we serve and minister to, we have to remember in humility that –

- Like us, many are too wounded to recognize real love when it comes their way.
- Like us, many are too poor and oppressed in spirit to show gratitude.
- Like us, many are too proud to recognize our ministry to them.
- Like us, many are simply too distracted to appreciate what has been done for them.



It would be so nice if the people we served were grateful. But their gratitude is not a necessity, or a prerequisite, for our doing ministry. Gratitude wasn't a prerequisite for Jesus to die for us and give us liberty.

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Lydia (her grandma's name) Cynthia (her mum's name) Neshangwe (her surname from her husband, Paul) is a product of the hands of many; she is a minister in the Presbytery of Zimbabwe.

### ***27. How Jesus treats those who fail***

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

29 "Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. 33 Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:28-33)

One of my favourite Biblical characters is Peter because I can identify so much with his journey of faith and experience. Here when we meet him in verses 28-33 he is simply overwhelmed when he sees Jesus walking on water. So much so that he shouts out, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." Fear turns into faith and courage because Peter realises that with Jesus he is safe. Jesus tells him to "come!" Peter got out of the boat without hesitation and headed for Christ.

However, we are told in the story that when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and began to sink. Peter did three things here: 1) He took his eyes off Jesus when he saw the wind. It happens to most of us. We fix our eyes on Jesus in trust and hope but then when the wind of suffering, death, bereavement, broken relationships, sickness and turmoil catches our eyes, we lose focus. We seem to settle on the wind rather than on Jesus. 2) Peter started to sink. That's precisely what happens to us when fear takes control. Fear and faith cannot live in the same heart, for fear always blinds the eyes to the presence of the Lord. 3) Peter knew that he was sinking but he also knew that he could cry out to Jesus: "Lord, save me!" Peter came back to his senses and realised that he needed to turn back to Jesus.

Note what Jesus does to help Peter. This is an indication of how Jesus treats those who fail. Firstly, Jesus immediately reached out and caught him. This is what Jesus does for us. He gives us the assurance of His presence and instils faith and hope in our hearts. We may not be immediately taken out of our situation but we are certainly given a new perspective about what is happening. Jesus comes to us in our storms of life and helps us to see things differently. Secondly, Jesus offered Peter a gentle rebuke: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Sometimes we also need this when we are confronted with failure. The question to Peter could be put like this: "Why did you take your eyes off me?" We probably do this a lot as well. But Jesus gently, and sometimes strongly, reminds us that we should not lose faith in Him. Thirdly, Jesus took Peter *through* the storm and placed him on the boat again. Isn't that remarkable? This is how Jesus journeys with you through failure giving you hope and restoration.

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Jerry Pillay is married to Sandra and they are blessed with three children, currently teaches Church History at the University of Pretoria and serves as President of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

### ***28. A Man Tragically Trapped***

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

18 "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good--except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.' "

20 "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

22 At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. (Mark10:17-22)

There are many things that can stop us from coming to Jesus and committing our lives to Him. This passage is just one example of how a person can be trapped and either unable or unwilling to give everything over to Christ. The story of the rich young ruler is told in three of the four gospels. Though Mark does not call him rich, it is implied in the text.

Our story opens with this man running and kneeling before Jesus, calling Him "good" and asking how he can inherit eternal life. On the surface, it may look like this man is earnestly seeking eternal life. But Jesus goes deeper and gets to the heart of the matter. To begin with, he tells the man, no person can be good enough to obtain eternal life. For if God is the standard for goodness, then without a doubt, all of us fall short. But our Lord, like a master surgeon, doesn't stop there, he goes deeper still, by challenging the man's religiosity. When Jesus questions him about the commandments, the young man is confident that he has kept the whole law. Again, this is a false route to eternal life, since none of us can work our way into heaven. It does not matter how religious we are, the Bible says that all our good works are like filthy rags before the Lord. There is an old saying, just because you spend a lot of time in a garage, doesn't necessarily make you a car. We can go to church every Sunday, be an elder, serve on various church committees, we can lead Bible Studies, be part of prayer groups, and do many other religious things. But if the Lord does not change our hearts, no amount of law keeping, will get us into his good books.

Finally, the truth is revealed. Jesus tells the rich young man to give up his earthly wealthy life, that he may inherit eternal life. This is just too high a price to pay for eternal life, so the young man walks away.

As I said earlier, many things keep us from truly following Christ. It may be our jobs, our peers, family expectations, or simply just the pull of the world. What are we holding onto today, which is trapping us and stopping us from following Him? Do not become tragically trapped by things that will pass away, rot, rust, or become worthless. Jesus must have all of us or none of us. Like the famous hymn says: Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full into his wonderful face, and the things of the world, will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.

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Douglas Bower is richly blessed to be married to Caitlin and will soon to be a father. He is also the Minister of St Columba's Presbyterian Church in Hatfield, Pretoria. His favourite saying is: "God is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in him alone."

### **29. A Last-minute Man**

And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew:  
THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

39 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."

40 But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."  
(Luke23:38-42)

According to a commentator: "There is only **one** death-bed conversion in the Bible, that all may have hope; there is **only** one that none may presume."

There is something fittingly appropriate that Jesus, who had shared in a baptism of sinners, had lived among sinners, should die between sinners.

Isaiah prophesied that He would be numbered with the transgressors (Is 53:12) and the measure of His Love and His identification with us in our sin is this: that He died with the flotsam and jetsam of the world. The hypocritical religious leaders, not content with engineering His crucifixion, in their hatred, maliciously taunted and tormented Jesus, aggravating His pain. "He

saved others, let Him save Himself". "If You are the King of the Jews, come down from the Cross." Jesus' reaction to this calculated insult and injury, was "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do".

It was then that one of the criminals felt himself smitten in conscience by the example of Jesus. The condemned criminal was convinced by the bearing and behaviour of Jesus that He was innocent, and he felt convicted by Jesus' goodness and by his own guilt. This criminal on the cross became aware that he was in the presence of a goodness that was as regal as it was divine. Turning to his companion-in-crime and punishment, he reminded him of the imminence of death and the certainty of judgement to come. "Do you not fear God, even though you are justifiably under the same condemnation?"

There is hope for a person who begins to understand that it is God with whom we have to do. This criminal on the cross was such, and his new understanding was immediately reflected in an intense and anxious concern for the welfare of his companion – this is GRACE in action – God's love already working in this convicted criminal as he responded to Jesus' prayer "Father, forgive them ....." then after expressing his concern for his companion he turns to Jesus: "Lord, remember me when you come into Your Kingdom. This is what happens when we make contact with the CROSS. When we lose contact with the CROSS our Christian life becomes flabby and frothy.

Jesus said: "If anyone would follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me".

When we renew contact with the Cross, like the criminal, we see ourselves as we really are; our concern for others grows and the Hope that is within us flourishes so that we reach out to others in their need. **The Cross becomes the Empty Cross – the Cross of Victory and Resurrection.**

*It is never too late.*

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Glen Craig is a retired UPCSA Minister, still active and living at Kenton-on-Sea. Jeanette is his wife and they have 4 surviving children and 10 grandchildren.

### **30. Crumbs & Exclusion**

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. 22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

25 The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

26 He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

27 "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

28 Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matthew 15:21-28)

When I thought of poverty, I imagined people at traffic lights begging for money or people destitute living under bridges. My theory on poverty as a minister and as the church was that we are called to work with the poor but also with the understanding that this problem would never go away. Verses where Jesus and the woman who poured perfume on his feet came to mind, when the disciples say to Jesus that perfume could have been sold and the money used to help the poor, Jesus replies and says you will always have the poor. 2 years ago I was asked to represent the denomination on a journey with CWM, which was looking at the eradication of poverty. Note it didn't say the "reduction" or "elevation" of poverty, implying that there would be less, but rather CWM was talking about **eradication**. I was convinced that was impossible... after 3 colloquia meeting in various parts of Africa, I was transformed. My mind was changed...

Is it possible for Jesus' mind to be changed? Is it possible for Jesus to be challenged?

These questions raise probably more theological questions than it answers. Although if we are to believe in the incarnational God, fully divine and fully human, then we have no choice but to entertain the idea.

If you read the chapter in its entirety, Jesus has a conversation with the Pharisees about them

using the laws to do or get what they want. The perception is that the Pharisees use the law to benefit themselves and don't use the law to bless others, which is what the law is suppose to do.

Then enter the Canaanite Woman asking Jesus to heal her daughter.

Interesting things to note: The woman addresses Jesus as the 'Son of David'. Jesus ignores the woman. Only after the disciples ask Jesus to tell her to go away, does he react. The words Jesus uses are shocking, calling the woman a dog.

Jesus engages this woman and He seems to have all the answers (perhaps laws); perhaps He didn't bank on this woman having her own answers. The woman speaks to Jesus 'heart' (v18). Jesus is changed somehow...

Are we open to being challenged, as we do God's mission in the world? Do we assume we have all the answers? Can our minds be changed or challenged to bless people who we don't expect God to be working for/with??

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### **31. Helping a doubter**

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." 26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." 28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John20:24-29)

I was reading some reviews on a commentary and one particular reviewer said that the commentary in question *stretches the mind and anchors the soul*. The telling the story of doubting Thomas does exactly that.

Thomas was not with the other disciples when they met on that first Sunday evening of Resurrection Day? The indication is that he was devastated, discouraged, distraught and disappointed. That led to his distance from the disciples and the events surrounding the death of one he had followed.

Thomas is not one depicted negatively in the NT except in this instance. John 11:16 depicts him as a courageous man, willing to go to Judea and die with the Lord!

The verb **said** in John 20:25 means that the disciples "kept saying to him" that they had seen the Lord Jesus Christ alive. He cannot get his head around a deceased man rising from the dead and he wants absolute proof.

He is only asking for a repeat of the previous Sunday. I believe the Holy Spirit is allowing the situation to develop for our benefit. *What comes out of the second Sunday meeting stretches the mind and anchors the soul*.

Jesus had heard Thomas' words; nobody had to report them to Him. So, the next Lord's Day, Jesus appears in the room and stands among them. Here is the graciousness of the Son. Not aloof, not a mystery, but revealing himself to the disciples and Thomas. *Ask and you shall receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened*. Here Jesus stands in their midst, giving full proof of his resurrection body. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the great revealers. He meets Thomas, the realist, at the point of his own need. There is no record that Thomas ever accepted the Lord's invitation to touch and feel. John 20:29 indicates that Thomas' testimony did not come from *touching* Jesus, but from his *seeing* Jesus. Jesus does not want his precious disciple hanging in the limbo of doubt. *"Do not be unbelieving, but believing."* Neither does he want you and I to be hamstrung by doubt and limited by indecision. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

My Lord and my God!" is the last of the testimonies that John records to the deity of Jesus Christ. So it is **that the most outrageous doubter of the resurrection of Jesus utters the greatest confession of the Lord who rose from the dead.** Then comes an additional beatitude written just for you and I: "*blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"

Thomas quit his doubt and the rest is history as they say.

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Submitted by Rev Dennis van der Spuy, husband to Pauline, now retired and living in Centurion