

Chapel Message Thursday 23rd March 2017

Sharpeville Day 21st March

Titus 2:7-8

⁷ Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, ⁸ and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about you.

I wonder what you did with your Human Rights Day on Tuesday. I would suppose, like many South Africans you gave it a brief nod at some point of the day and pegged it as another day for the politicians to address the crowds – a day to not be at school or work – a day off from the business of life.

I wonder how many of you would have been aware of the other name for 21st March in the sad and dreadful history of our past – a day etched into the minds of many by its other name – Sharpeville Day.

I was privileged to have spent time ministering in Sharpeville and to travel the dusty township starts of a place which really has not changed much since that dreadful day in 1960. My elderly companion, Vincent Leoetswa, who remembers the day well, had invited me to spend some time in his part of the world. We met at the St Cyprians Anglican Church situated on the edge of a large, dusty, overgrown common area with churches of other denominations scattered around the edge: the Methodists to the right, the Baptists to the left. In the distance the local police station, the municipal library, and the soccer stadium. Not an attractive place, piles of rubbish and coal ash. Children half-heartedly kicking a soccer ball around in the space where a large monument would later be erected for the victims of the Sharpeville massacre on 21st March 1960.

Vincent tells me it was an ordinary township day. He had locked his house and walked up the road to the local library to open up for the day. As Librarian, he was in a prime position to see the police station, the common area, the surrounding houses and people going about their business.

People started to gather in the pen area. They were discussing the Pass Law – how wrong it was, and how angry they were getting at being harassed by the police. The Pan-Africanist slogan 'Izwe Lethu', which means 'Our Land', was shouted while others gave the thumbs-up, freedom salute and shouted 'Afrika!'

They were grinning cheerfully and nobody seemed to be afraid as they stood on the streets chatting with their neighbours and friends.

There was some tension in the air. The crowd got bigger. The government had insisted that all people had to carry their reference book, an ID book that confirmed who you were and where you came from. You were not allowed to travel freely and had to stay in the area the government had said you could be in. The danger of arrest was always present – “where’s your pass?” the police would demand. “No pass! You are under arrest.”

The locals were growing increasingly tired of this bullying and intimidation. Today they were going to do something about it. Today they would have their say. And so the crowd began to gather outside the police station, some of the braver ones deliberately leaving their passes at home and presenting themselves for arrest. Hymns were being sung and the crowd grew bigger and more restless. Jet planes flew overhead. The policemen inside the station grew more and more nervous. “This is our land” shouted those in the crowd. “No more passes” shouted others.

Suddenly something like a firecracker was heard, then another, and another. A whole lot of firecrackers, except these were bullets. Guns being fired into the crowd, Browning machine guns spitting death into the crowd. Vincent ducked low beneath the windowsill of his library. Even here, panes of glass shattered, bullets pockmarked the walls.

It was all over in ten minutes and then the terrible silence interspersed with the cries of the wounded “they shot us, many are dead!” The awful realisation of what had just happened, a memory which stayed a lifetime in Vincent’s memory. I saw only shoes, hats and a few bicycles left among the bodies. Even at the age of 80 that memory was crystal clear, and we wept together – for the dead, for the living and for those whose lives would never be the same again.

On that day, 69 people died and 180 were wounded when police fired on a peaceful crowd that had gathered in protest against the Pass laws. That day marked an affirmation by ordinary people rising in unison to proclaim their rights. That day 21st March 1960, became an iconic date in our country’s history, and so we commemorate Human Rights Day as a reminder of our rights and the cost paid for our treasured human rights.

The 21st March, Human Rights Day in South Africa, is a day for us to remember the daily struggle of many of our brothers and sisters as we strive to build our new democracy, our new and emerging country amid all the hatred, suspicion, greed and corruption of the world we live in, as we celebrate the right for each one of us to peacefully co-exist and to strive for a better world for all.

Each of us is challenged and invited to make a difference, to reach out across the many things that divide us and to remind each other of our equal heritage as South Africans – as a nation that has been deeply hurt and divided but also as a nation who can sing and dance and dream together of a brighter and more promising future. Human Rights Day reminds us that our human rights apply to everyone. All people have the right to life, equality and human dignity, freedom of movement and education irrespective of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, whether they are foreign nationals or not.

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Amen