

New Creation

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Date: 13 December 2009

Preacher: Bishop Trevor Walters

- [0 : 00] I speak to you in the name of the Lord I love and of the one I'm privileged to serve. Amen.
- Whenever I come to St. John's I'm always interested to see the latest influence of Australia. I noticed today that you have a baptism the front and one at the back and I'm wondering with the way that the Australians tend to do things whether you baptise at both ends.
- I'm privileged today to speak about the chapter in Acts which represents a dramatic crossroads in the life of the early church.
- And you know what? It's so relevant for us today, right now. The crossroads has four roads leading to this particular intersection.
- The intersection in the early church and the intersection right now in our life in the Anglican Communion. The first of those intersections is a great transition in the centre of power and authority.
- [1 : 28] The second of those transitions represents the persecution of the church. The third represents baptism, the mission of the church, the movement from darkness to light.
- And the fourth is the remarkable spread of the gospel that will happen as a result of the previous three. And so I'm going to take you around the crossroads using the 11th chapter of Acts and the 12th chapter and invite you to look at the life of the early church and the life of our present journey as faithful Christians in a world which is challenging.
- Shifts in power. In the first century, the greatest transition in the life of the early church was the movement from Jerusalem to Antioch.
- What about the movement from Canterbury to Alexandria? The second transition in the early church was the movement from the significant role that Peter, James and John had to the role that Barnabas will have and then when he finds Paul, the role of Paul and Barnabas because the rest of the book of Acts is almost exclusively about the ministry of Paul and Barnabas.
- What about the shift from Archbishop Rowan Williams to Archbishop Chu, Southeast Asia, or Archbishop Akinola?
- [3 : 19] There is a great shift in the early church of influence when we move from Antioch, from Jerusalem to Antioch. There is a new centre of mission.
- Antioch is known for its church planting, its dramatic increase of the gospel. And the Jerusalem church bless it.
- We are in a moment in history where there is a transition from the Anglican Church of Canada to the province of North America, the new Anglican province of North America, that had its second general convention this last weekend in Toronto.
- But in contrast to the early church, the mission and evangelism of the Achna province is actually not being blessed by the Jerusalem church.
- That is the first intersection in our crossroads we are considering this morning as we look at the book of Acts, chapter 11 and 12.

[4 : 33] The second element in the crossroads is persecution. In the early church, when you reach chapter 11, you already know that Stephen has died as a martyr.

And you are immediately introduced to the fact that James, the brother of John, the sons of Zebedee, those two men who were looking to be at the left and right hand of Jesus, remember when their mum came and said, could you promote my boys to the front seats?

And Jesus said, painfully, looking at James and John, can you drink the cup of suffering? And surely Jesus knew the end of James and what the end of John would be.

And they said, we can. And Jesus said, you will. And persecution of the church was marked by the death of James.

Herod, in his alignment with the Jewish people, sees that the Jews are much in favour of this crucifixion of James.

[5 : 55] And so, Peter is arrested. the next, the most significant of all the disciples is now put in jail. And the story of persecution is about taking out leaders.

Because the ruler of this world targets leaders, as you know, in this parish, right now. But the good news in this story is that the power of leaders who are ungodly, seeking to destroy the children of God and the bride of Christ, have been bracketed by the sovereignty of God.

God has put limits to what corrupt leaders can do. For we are to see that Herod's power, just as his forefather, another Herod, in the first century, had limits to his power.

You remember Herod? At this time of the year, we think of the Herod that tried to persuade, bribe the wise men to tell where Jesus was to be born. And his best trickery failed.

This Herod failed. Although he did his absolute best to guarantee the death of Peter, do you see what lengths he went to to use his power to make sure that Peter would not survive the sword?

[7 : 30] Let's go through what Herod set up to guarantee Peter's captivity. Four cohorts of four, 16 soldiers.

And how do we know that these soldiers were earnest about their task? Well, we know that they were actually sentenced to death themselves for failing in their task.

So we know that these soldiers knew that they had a responsibility to look after Peter and if they failed, they would pay the ultimate price. These weren't lazy soldiers who fell asleep.

Secondly, in conventional prisons in the first century, prisoners were chained, one, the left arm to the left guard, the right arm to the right guard.

Peter was double-chained to both guards. There were three doors guarding Peter from the outside world.

[8 : 42] And where do we find Peter in the midst of this time? The day before the end of Passover when we knew that Herod would not incite the Jews by killing someone during Passover.

Passover, this was the day, the next day that he would do it. After the Passover, we find Peter asleep the day before he's to die.

How many of you have traveled to London or Australia in economy? I've been there a few times.

Annick Orr sends us in economy. I can tell you that I twitch for about nine hours sitting between two large people not being chained and not going to my death in England.

Isn't it extraordinary? Peter slept the night with shackles. Now, we have to recognize Peter had been released twice before from jail.

[9 : 55] He'd escaped jail Acts 4, Acts 5. So, perhaps Peter had some faith that he would be okay. enough at least to get him to sleep.

But don't you think that Peter was living with a great deal of human fear about what would happen to him? It had happened to Stephen and James and he knew he was a marked person.

He knew that he would be a great prize to Herod dead rather than alive. And yet, it's in the middle of the night when he's asleep that the angel comes and nudges him nudges him in the ribs and says, Peter, get up, wake up.

And the angel, do you recognize the angel has to actually tell Peter what you would normally do if you woke up in the middle of the night and had to go outside into the cold? The angel has to tell him, put your shoes on, Peter, like a two-year-old.

Put your coat around you, Peter. Now get up, now follow me. Because Peter is not sure whether this is a dream or whether this is real.

[11 : 11] And it's only when Peter gets outside does the text say Peter came to his own mind and realized it wasn't a dream.

What does those few words, what do they remind you of? He came to his own mind and one of the, now you have to do better than the nine o'clock service and the seven thirty service because they couldn't get this either.

So, they obviously don't teach the Bible here. Sorry, Dan, sorry. David's away, I can get away with it. What did the prodigal son say when he was in the midst of the pig's will?

He came to his own mind and said, I remember that even my father's servants have food enough to eat and a place to sleep. I will go back to my father and say I have sinned, I know worthy to be called your son, take me back into your household.

The prodigal son in his false self living with the illusion that happiness would be found in pleasure, happiness would be found in rebellion, happiness would be found in the world, comes to his own mind, which is something that often happens when you have a child, doesn't it?

[12 : 45] You suddenly realise life is about looking after this precious one. Life is about rethinking my values, rethinking my faith, rethinking now I have a responsibility to pass on a heritage.

What heritage am I going to pass on? I come into my own mind and decided what it was I needed to do that was good and honourable and worthy and lovable.

And the prodigal turns back to the father and Peter having lived these days in the darkness of the world's worst punishment formed in fear in the jail comes to his own mind and his own mind is formed now by what God can do in the midst of the darkest worst place in life.

That's the bracket I'm talking about. When you live in the bracket of suffering and loss and grief you cannot see another world.

You cannot see the purposes of God or the sovereignty of God. For those of you who've lost children and spouses and positions you know what that's like until by revelation of God's sovereign love he shows you that the suffering is only a part of the story.

[14 : 29] That the sovereignty of God's purposes are not going to be overcome by the greatest loss. And Peter now is on the other side of the bracket of suffering.

He shakes his head and said you know I knew God could do this but to be honest I didn't really believe it. And now we get Rhoda the maid who echoes the same faith and disbelief.

Have you ever tried to get buzzed into an apartment building? Well this is the story. You buzz in and the person says oh hello Peter it's you and you say yes and before you could say get me inside quickly they've disappeared and you stand now by the door waiting to push when the buzzer goes and there's no buzzer and you eventually have to go back to the intercom and press the button again and say I want to get in but I need to get in quickly you don't know what's happened to me.

And Rhoda who is so bewildered by the fact that we've been praying earnestly for the release of Peter and he's now outside the door cannot believe that the prayer is answered.

That's what it's like when you come into your own mind. Your true mind is the mind that says God's in control God loves me God has answered my prayers and I'm now overwhelmed by the confidence that God is God that God is going to take care of my life my future he's answering my prayers now the next intersection is much shorter you'll be pleased to know that the next intersection is the rise and fall of leaders it's very simple really the bracket that God put around Herod was that when Herod stepped over the line he was gone he was toast what was the line that Herod stepped over the moment he accepted the adulation of the people from

[16 : 59] Tyre and Sidon that he in fact was a God the moment he received that and welcomed it and affirmed that belief he was gone Josephus the Jewish historian writes about Herod Agrippa and this encounter with the people of Tyre and Sidon and Josephus records that the people of Tyre and Sidon in their attempt to flatter King Herod said this may you be propitious to us and if we have hitherto deemed you as mere mortal man henceforth we will affirm you as no mortal man and Herod would have said to that well you know I think you're right I think that I cannot be regarded as mere mortal man you're absolutely right

I like what you're saying and that was the moment he crossed over the line the moment he took on the belief that he was immortal he got the most terrible stomach ache do you know what stomach ache does it causes the head to bow down isn't it interesting that if Herod had become so haughty that his chin was high in the air you either whack someone in the solar plexus or you provide a few worms at the centre of one's being to double you up it took five days for Herod to die the moment people take on the notion that they are God their end is very quick and who would we be thinking about in the news in the last three weeks one of my gods

I confess Tiger Woods that has been so painful that has been so upsetting that we so want role models we so want heroes we so want people who we can admire and follow and raise them up as no mortal man and the moment we do that and they accept that we put them there and they accept that the rules don't apply to them their demise is so quick and I could give you a litany of people for whom that has been the case and you could provide the same litany and we won't affirm the ungodliness this morning but we will affirm that

God brackets humanity that gets in the place of God now quickly the final point the crossroads so far has involved massive shifts of power it has evolved persecution and it has involved leaders taking on power which is inordinate taking on authority which was not theirs to take on and their demise by the sovereign God has been very very quick but all of this is to say that the last intersection is that this was a period in the church's life that was the most effective in terms of the evangelism of the world that we've ever known the gospel went forth because the old comfortable structures were broken new leaders were affirmed new ministry was set ablaze in the world and the gospel was preached despite persecution

I want to end this way I always thought that I would be a Peter in the story and not a James didn't you think that you would all be Peters in the story and not James didn't we all somehow believe that it would have a happy ending a happy ending for who for me and my world and my well-being and my comfortable pew but the story is not about us the story is about a triumphant end for the kingdom kingdom of God and I don't know whether you or I have an ending that looks like

[22 : 37] James or Peter I don't know whether you die in the story or whether you have a dramatic conversion it's not a conversion he was already converted a new level an epiphany of faith and you go forth to evangelize the world I don't know the ending of your story I know the ending of my wife's story but I know that the God who is the God of Peter and James and John and Stephen will bring about his kingdom in a way that will exceed our imagination but I cannot promise you that your ending will be that of Peter but I can promise you that

God's sovereign purposes will be fulfilled can you drink the cup of suffering Amen let us pray there will be moments of silence between the spoken prayers when you may add your own intercessions in the quietness of your own heart Heavenly

Father we thank you that we the family of St. John's are your children and that we are under your care you are our mighty God and Father who knows what we need before we ask who desires more than anything else to have a relationship with us we thank you for your great love for us for your grace and mercy for your forgiveness we thank you for your word by which the power of the Holy Spirit guides and teaches us thank you for the example of the early church and their willingness to suffer for your truth we thank you for your son Jesus whose birth we are getting ready to celebrate and we thank you for baby

Abigail who was received into this community of believers today thank you Father for your every provision for us Father we come to you today with concerns about our way forward as a church family we are deeply aware of our great need for your guidance as we consider whether or not to appeal the court's judgment or to accept this judgment and prepare to leave our buildings help us to discern together your leading father and what our next course of action should be focus our hearts on what would best serve the purposes of the gospel keep us unified in our decision whatever whatever that decision is give us special sensitivity during this time to honor one another's thoughts and feelings and to help each other to trust you for everything dear lord we bring to you the other churches and all the clergy affected by this recent court ruling may a true spirit of unity and mutual care bind together these four network churches st.

Matthias and st. luke church of the good shepherd st. matthews abbotsford as well as our own church we pray for the clergy in each of these churches remembering simon chin mike stewart and ken deeks and here at st.

[27 : 57] john's david dan and jim as well as jim packer jim ferguson and eric thurston and we pray for our newly consecrated bishops stephen leung trevor walters and charlie masters may they each find their strength in you lord god and experience your protection for themselves and for their families we do ask father that you will continue continue your work of healing and restoration in the life of our rector david short and father we pray for our former bishop michael ingham may he know the power of your redemptive love in his life and that of his family this christmas heavenly father we give thanks for all those in lay leadership who are faithfully serving you both in this church family and in the other network churches we remember especially our wardens david avrin and leslie bentley and our trustees and church committee strengthen them we pray when they are weary and their burdens of responsibility weigh heavy on their shoulders may each experience your peace in the night and be renewed by you every morning we also give thanks for all who are working behind the scenes during these difficult days thinking especially of our church staff heavenly father we now bring to you the church worldwide remembering our missionaries jeremy curry with ywam in nepal and tibet and erica and just catalan in jerusalem and here in vancouver we pray for richie spedell with navigators and kirsten rummery with living waters jesus we ask that you would care for them protect them and supply their every need father we are mindful of those for whom the christmas season is a painful time perhaps because of loneliness or the loss of loved ones or maybe due to unemployment or ill health may all in distress find you to be their strength and refuge the god of all comfort may they experience the length and breadth of your loving kindness and now we take a few moments to remember those in our church family who are ill we lift up to you harold yvette rosemary gordon marguerite and harry we thank you for your love and care to each one and pray that they might know your great mercy and healing touch this day lastly jesus we bring to you a concern or a thanksgiving that might be on our hearts this day all these

prayers we offer in the name of the father the son and the holy spirit amen for time