

New Era For Ordinary People

- discourse from the Gospel of St Luke and the Acts of the Apostles

The 15 sermons we hereby present from which preachers may select for use in your local 2010 Pentecost prayer meetings, is a translation of the recent Afrikaans CLF publication, “*Nuwe tyd vir gewone mense*”, by dr Pieter van Niekerk, pastor of the URC congregation Friemersheim in the Southern Cape.

The United Ministry for Service and Witness pray that you will receive God’s richest blessings in the coming days of Pentecost and that we all will experience that the Holy Spirit visited us and transformed us into useful builders of God’s kingdom in and from our local communities.

We pray with you for a refreshed insight in Scripture and for a willingness to obediently follow in the footsteps of our Master, Jesus Christ.

Johan Botha

(On behalf of the United Ministry for Service and Witness)

Contents

1. Jesus announces the Gospel – St Luke 4: 42-44
2. “These men seem not ready for this type of work...!” St Luke 5: 1-11
3. A new era requires a new way of thinking – St Luke 5: 33-39
4. How do you see Jesus? St Luke 9: 18-27
5. Who then is important? - St Luke 9:46-48; St Luke 18: 15-17
6. The church is on the move – St Luke 10:1-16
7. Jesus enjoys dining out – St Luke 14:15-24
8. Jesus speaks up against injustice – St Luke 19: 45-48
9. We look at the King – St Luke 23:26-43
10. To be guided by the living Word – St Luke 24: 13-35
11. Our bond with Jesus exacts a price – Acts 4:32-37
12. Do not mess with our elders –Acts 6:1-7
13. The church of the Lord is colour blind – Acts 8
14. The captain helps Peter find his way – Acts 10:1-34
15. A western (European) business woman opens her heart to Jesus – Acts 16: 11-15; 40

Introduction

I hope this collection of sermons achieves what we set out to achieve! This is an effort to reflect on the thoughts from the pen of Luke the evangelist from the perspective of our current circumstances. I shall be delighted if we can take ownership of them in a Biblically responsible manner and to share the message from them with others. Of course, you will most likely get a glimpse into my own heart; how my mind functions. It is written in my style and from my perspective. My insight is limited and it is therefore wonderful to bring the insights from others to bear on this – to the glory of God. You are free to give free rein to your thoughts and to allow the Holy Spirit to

continue to read the text from your own circumstances and to enter into a dialogue with God regarding this.

Eugene Peterson says: exegesis (the interpretation and understanding of scriptures) means so to love God that one will stand still and carefully listen to what He says. According to Peterson, God does not deliver speeches; no, He enters into conversations with people and makes us become participants in the dialogue. This volume will attempt to give further stimulus to His dialogue, on the basis of what St Luke reported.

Klaus Nürnberger is of the opinion that if one wants to understand the intention of the Bible, one should not expect a set of theological teachings, but must recognise that in each epoch God sees the need of people and acts in a way that provides deliverance.

I have chosen these specific stories from St Luke and the Acts of the Apostles for this volume because they show something of the loving kindness of God and explicate it in such a beautiful manner. St Luke, of all the evangelists, is the one who places the most emphasis on God's discourse on the destitute, the aggrieved and the indigent. God is manifested in Jesus. His will and His grace are seen in Jesus. Jesus cares, He visits and goes around with ordinary people. He listens to women, children, the poor, the tax collectors and Samaritans – all those who are branded as unacceptable, the broken ones, the suffering, marginalized people of his time. Jesus teaches his followers to care for all people, especially those who are so easily overlooked.

St Luke goes further in his story about Jesus; he also tells the story of the first Christian church. David Bosch has wondered whether St Luke has not come to a better realization than his contemporaries of the dawning of a new era, and that it became necessary to take the story further than the life of Jesus. St Luke saw the two books, viz. the Gospel of St Luke and the Acts, as perhaps one book consisting of two volumes. "St Luke perceives the ministry of Jesus as one in which the people on the periphery of society receive compassion and as a ministry to which the church of his time have been called" (Bosch).

St Luke was not only interested in the church, but also in the people outside the church. He was an educated man and a non-Jew who wanted to bring the good news to ordinary people, people like you and me. The poor, as well as the rich – all of them have a place in God's kingdom. "He wants to point out the road to the future to a Christian community consisting of Jews and non-Jews" (Bosch).

God listens to ordinary people; he cares for everyone and sends us forth into the new era and into a changed world. Perhaps one of the greatest wonders is that He trusts us with his mission, that he enters into dialogue with us, and that he listens to us. This He does, while He teaches us to also listen to the voices around us that has become mute, the voices that most of the time we do not hear any more.

Pieter van Niekerk
(April 2010)

1. Jesus announces the Gospel

St Luke 4: 16-30

St Luke describes it here in a striking manner: Jesus's first words in public, his induction sermon. One could perhaps say that this first sermon of Jesus was his declaration about the deepest purpose of his ministry here on earth. Here Jesus announces for the first time his calling in front of people. But wait, let me read this portion to you...

The poor

Jesus's calling is clear. According to St Luke, Jesus was called to minister to the poor. Naturally this would make some people feel uncomfortable. But yes, Jesus is not only concerned about the spiritual needs of the people; their physical distress, their struggles in this world, touched Him deeply.

In those days there were many people in dire situations – just like today. The society, in which Jesus lived, consisted mainly of poor people. A middle class, such as we have in our country, was out of the question. The vast majority was poverty-stricken. Poor they were, to the extent that they had to beg. Scholars believe that the rich in those days made out only about 2% of the population. These wealthy people, however, owned more than half the wealth of their country. The gap between the rich and the poor was enormous. To me it seems as if this was even greater than the gap between the rich and the poor that we are currently experiencing in our country – and this is one of the largest gaps in the world today!

In those days most of the Jews were small-scale farmers who owned the land collectively. Together they could eke out an existence. But when the Romans conquered the country, a new policy was introduced. Large farms were established. The small farmers were forced to go and work on these farms for their wealthy masters. They became like handymen and day labourers. Their earnings were hardly enough to provide for their families. If a labourer could not find work for a few days, his family had to go without food.

It is therefore not surprising that Luke the evangelist had such a lot to say about Jesus caring for the poor. Everything Jesus said, according to St Luke, about the weak, those that were scorned and despised, is introduced by the word “the poor”. But it is now time to first focus on what the mission of Jesus was.

Jesus's first sermon: good news for the poor

On a Sabbath day in Nazareth, a young man who grew up in the village preaches in the synagogue. He is preaching to people who are familiar with poverty. This is Jesus, a young man of the village.

He opens the Bible of his time and reads from the Book of the prophet Isaiah. He reads the first verse of chapter 61 and adds the verse “to free the oppressed” from chapter 58. The verses that Jesus reads were prophetic words addressed to the poor and indigent Jews during the time of Isaiah. In those days people had to pawn their houses and vineyards for the sake of money. At times they even had to hand their

children over to the rich as slaves. Humanly speaking, there was no hope of redemption from debt and poverty. God, however, wants to assure them that He did not forget them. The prophet promises a total turnaround of their desperate circumstances. God will come to their aid; He will declare his year of grace...

Jesus's liberating message was grounded in this. The good news is for the poor. The poor are those who suffer, the weak, the scorned and the despised. The prisoners are the victims of oppression, caught up in a system that makes one think of apartheid and other similarly unjust social and political systems. (Of course there are also people who are prisoners of poverty and wretchedness because of their own doing. Also in cases like these God is a God of grace.) They will be freed. The blind, those who cannot see the light, will see light, the light that will come to fruition with the coming of the Redeemer. The oppressed are the victims of violence, and the wounded and those who are broken. They will be freed from their oppressors.

The poor, in the time of Isaiah, and the poor today, are mostly victims of injustice. But even they are sinners. The solution for them lies in the Lord's year of grace: the dawning of grace and the end of wretchedness – a new dispensation. When Jesus finished reading from the book of Isaiah, he expounded on this with the following words: "Today the Scripture that you just heard, have been fulfilled". This was fulfilled in Jesus with the power of the Spirit. St Luke emphasizes the working of the Holy Spirit and says that with its advent the might and right of God in the world has become visible again. Where Jesus comes and where his Word is heard, the light breaks through, and justice breaks through.

His liberating message is received with wonder. But still it is rejected. And because Jesus did not also read Isaiah 61 verse 2, Jesus the liberator, also let loose thoughts of revenge! And when he proofed that non-Jews have a greater need for God's grace, it was one too many for the religious leaders of the Jews; they who regarded themselves as better than the poor, they who thought that grace was only meant for them and not for the poor and the simple. The fact that God does justice to all incensed them. The message of Jesus means a total turnaround, another way of looking at the world. They were not prepared for this. Jesus's good news to the poor, the gospel of liberation, is rejected because they could not accept it.

The Old and New Testament bears testimony of God's compassion for the underprivileged, the marginalized and the outcasts. If we ignore this, we miss out on God's grace and the purpose for which He sent Jesus to this earth.

And what about the rich?

And what about the oppressors, the people who look down upon the poor and who exploit them? Is God's grace also meant for them? Assuredly the year of grace is also meant for them, but then they have to be converted; they have to see that justice is done; they even will have to become like the poor who knows that they are dependent only on God's grace. Those who have power and wealth, who are touched by the message of Jesus, can show mercy to the poor, and extend a hand of compassion and justice to the people who are disadvantaged by unfair practices and actions in society.

The liberation brought about by Jesus, demands from his followers the choice of total adherence or discipleship. We must stand where God stands: Because He is the

source of what is right, He stands in unjust situations by the side of those who are wronged. This is how God is praised in his greatness (Psalm 146); and this is how Jesus outlines his mission. As followers of Jesus, as people in service of God (Romans 6:13), the church has been called to help actualize the year of grace, the year of restoration (The Belhar Confession). The Gospel of Jesus brings a message of hope and liberation to all. In St Luke's gospel it is a message of hope, especially for the poor.

2. "These men seem not ready for this type of work...!" St Luke 5:

St Luke 5: 1-11

Fishermen can be rather uncouth

An old fisherman tells us that the men who does deep sea fishing and who often spend days away from home, can become rough and rude when they find themselves on the sea. They think nothing of pulling out a knife. You have to be very careful when out there, otherwise you may not come back alive. I don't know if his story is true, but you really have to be tough to brave wind and weather on the deep blue sea for days on end.

In Jesus's time Galilee was home to a well-established fishing industry – people made a living from catching fish; this was their work. Just like today the fish were caught either from the shore or from a boat. The fish were mostly caught in nets. The Sea of Galilee (also known as the Sea of Tiberias or the Lake of Gennesaret) could at times become tempestuous and dangerous. The boats were primitive and not always strong enough for the storms. Sometimes the poor fishermen returned from their outings, disappointed, with empty boats without fish.

Most of the fishermen in our country are not able to catch fish throughout the year and ordinary fishermen have a hard time trying to get a quota. When they do, their families can hardly live off their catch. Even though they are hardworking, fishermen are among the poorest of the poor.

A significant part of Jesus's ministry took place in towns along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is therefore not strange that Jesus initially found his workers on the shore. At least seven of his disciples were fishermen. Peter, his brother Andrew, James and his brother John were partners in a fishing business. But one can imagine how much work they had to put in order to put food on the table.

Jesus calls the fishermen

Om one occasion Jesus was preaching at the Sea of Galilee. To me it seems there were so many people that came to listen to him that there were hardly place for a mouse. Jesus then made a plan because, you see, He did not want anybody to miss the occasion. Jesus saw two boats floating near the edge of the water. He climbs into one of the boats and asks the owner to take it in a bit further. The owner of the boat

was none other than Simon Peter. Standing in Peter's boat, Jesus started preaching to the crowd.

After finishing his sermon, Jesus asked Peter to take the boat deeper into the sea and told him to cast his nets. Prior to this Peter and his companions had spent a long night on the sea without catching any fish. They must have been rather fed up and Peter would no doubt have been rather sceptical when Jesus made this request. It is strange that the hardened, rugged Peter, who was the captain of his boat, immediately did what Jesus asked him to do. There is something about Jesus which persuaded him. Jesus acted with such authority that made Peter feel he had no choice but to listen to him. Peter then cast the nets and before the eyes of the tired fishermen a miracle happened. They made the catch of their lives. The nets were bursting with all the fish that were caught. The other boat came to their aid and so many fish were caught to the extent that both boats almost sank. The fishermen could not believe their luck. Jesus demonstrated his grace to the fishermen, without asking for anything in return, without them having earned it. He provides abundantly. He can be trusted.

Peter was so overcome by the wonder of Jesus, that he fell down before Jesus and confessed his sins. Peter was ready for his calling. Jesus then told Peter: "Do not be afraid. Your work has just begun. From now on you will become a fisher of men. You will make many people believe in Me." It was not necessary for Peter to attend classes, to take courses and obtain certificates to become a disciple of Jesus. He was called by Jesus just there - just as he was.

Jesus's first disciple was a fisherman from the working class! Jesus also called other fishermen. They also instantly left their boats and followed Jesus. Jesus found his followers in the workplace, at the fishing boats and on the market square. This is not surprising, because these are the places Jesus visited, places where one would not expect Him to go.

Just as the shepherds were the first to hear the good news, so Jesus is calling ordinary people, people like the fishermen. The smell of sheep dung or the stink of fish do not scare him off. Nobody is too sinful or too unworthy to be called by Jesus and to be entrusted with his mission. We don't even have to leave our place of work. No, he calls us and there and then assigns us to do His work. In His kingdom there is work for each one of us. If we follow him, Jesus makes us fishers of men.

Are we fishermen on the open sea?

It is as though Jesus wants to tell us that He understands fishermen and the work they are doing. This is why He calls us to venture out on the open sea with him. Stephan Joubert wonders why church people have changed the church into a fish tank, something that one has to maintain all the time. No, we as fishermen have been called out into the open sea. He is of the opinion that many people in church would not even know what to do if the fish start biting on their hooks. He is pleading for open-sea disciples of Jesus, rather than fish-tank visitors to church.

It is said that most of the yachts, those expensive and special seacraft that were built for the open sea, never sail more than 5 km away from where they are anchored. It is

so easy to be followers of Jesus inside the church and to maintain church things and customs. It is like preserving you boat, painting and polishing it and protecting it against wear and tear, but never using it to sail out on the open sea. Followers of Jesus sail out and are exposed to the sea with all its riches as well as the storms and other dangers, even to modern day pirates. The sea keeps one humble. Fishermen have great respect for the sea, which changes continually. Followers, members of this congregation are called to weigh the anchor, set sail off into the open sea, where God is already on the move. We are called knowing that as a fisher of men you never have to be afraid.

It is not surprising that the first Christian symbol was a fish. Followers of Jesus are fishers of men. When the followers of Jesus were persecuted, they identified themselves by, among other things, drawing a fish on the ground using their big toe. But as fishers of men much more is required than having fish stickers on our cars and taxis. Wherever we are, we carry the fish in our hearts, mouths and eyes. We are friendly, peace loving and, in a credible manner, radiate the salvation of Jesus, the glad tidings. We are content to follow without fear the route map to which God sends our congregation.

3. A new era requires a new way of thinking

St Luke 5: 33-39

Religion can make life oh so difficult

The church of 2010 is at the crossroads. If one reads all the letters and opinions in newspapers, then it seems as if the church in particular is not only at the crossroads, but also under barrage of criticism. At this crossroad one is likely to find different types of believers, according to Prof. Russel Botman. There are of course those who question everything, who can or will no longer believe. But on the other hand one finds those who simply believe and hold onto everything that they were taught as children. It is even possible that they are holding on to (clutching at) straws and might feel affronted if someone dares to tamper with their "straws" or even just ask questions. They take the faith and form it into a little group that excludes other people, a club for people of similar ilk or belief. If you don't in every detail believe as they do, you are not accepted and will be cast out. They know the church discipline and firmly believe it must be more strictly enforced.

There is also a third group on the crossroad, sitting right in the middle of the road and who is crying out: "One can ponder one's own belief, and each one is entitled to his own opinion ". In this way they do not really meet anyone on the crossroad. They tolerate everything and have respect for nothing.

If we pat ourselves on the back because we believe that our faith is "right" and that of others "wrong", then we do not understand the essential element of the church qua church.

Religion has a built-in tendency to make life difficult for people and to lay a burden on them, rather than to serve up God's goodness to them and to free them from man-

made rules and prescriptions. In the section we read we heard how Jesus protested against the view that religion loads a burden on people. In verse 34 Jesus says the following: “Can you imagine a wedding feast where the guests are fasting. The bridegroom from heaven is present. How is it possible then for people to weep?” (By the way, if a wedding happened to take place on a day of fasting, the Jews even went so far as to suspend the fast.) It is time to celebrate! It is a time in which everyone, but more especially the wretched and the weary, the lonely and the outcasts, have with them the Healer and Saviour. And now some people actually want them to sit on one side with sombre-looking faces, constrained by petty religious rules.

New wine in new wineskins!

Jesus tells his critics that they do not have the faintest idea what the church is all about. “Guests at a wedding don’t stand around with long faces, with tears in their eyes, do they? No, they are there to celebrate.” They eat and they drink because they share in the joy of the bridegroom. This not a time for sadness. It is a time for being joyful, because I, the bridegroom, is with you, Jesus says.

Religion, therefore, is not about the maintenance of traditions or a lot of man-made rules – it is about the Bridegroom, the living Lord who is with us, the ordinary people. And that is indeed a reason for celebrating!

Jesus uses two images to explain his words. The image of a new cloth and that of new wine. In those days wine was stored in sacks made of goat skins. New wineskins were used because they were flexible enough to withstand the chemical reaction of the wine against it. A used wineskin gradually becomes hard and loses its flexibility and is likely to burst. New wine, as a result of the fermentation process, caused the wineskins to expand. Old wineskins, on the other hand, were hardened and dried out and if new wine was to be poured into them could cause the wineskins to burst (this, according to the exegete, Isak du Plessis in *Die Bybellennium*). Jesus compares the Pharisees, the religious leaders of that time, to wineskins. They were like old wineskins, hard and rigid, not capable of any spiritual flexibility. They could not and would not accept Jesus, because he did not fit in with their traditional conceptions, their man-made religious rules. The things that Jesus taught the people, could not fit in easily with their old traditions. Being a Christian and a church demands from us new attitudes, new traditions, and even new structures. It requires from us to renew our lives in this confused world we are living in, to look at others in a new way and to serve Christ in a new way.

It is true that seasoned wine drinkers prefer mature wines. Thus we find that many religious people continue in the old ways of doing and thinking...It makes them feel safe.

It is also true that Jesus did not reject all traditions and customs of the Jews. So for example there is nothing wrong with fasting. Jesus himself fasted. It was, however, not the right time to fast, because fasting was, after all, a sign of mourning and humbling oneself. But now, Jesus says, it is time to celebrate.

Perhaps Jesus wants to sound a warning, as he did in other places, against religious customs that have lost their content and meaning along the way, and which are

merely employed for the sake of appearances. Already in the times of the Old Testament the Lord sent his prophets to warn against this. In Isaiah 58 we hear how the people, who go without food and through this saying how sorry they are for their sins, accuse God and ask of him “why do you not notice when we go fasting?” But God saw right through them. They were not sincere. During the period of fasting they fought amongst each other and their workers had to work harder. An then the unexpected remark: you allow your heads to hang like faded flowers, and you think that I want that. No, says the Lord, what I want is for you to stop doing wrong things. Rather go help those who are suffering. Give food to the hungry. If you do these things , then you will be happy, says the Lord.

Jesus wants our hearts to be tender and caring, so that we can accept His message, the message that changes lives, and make it our own. Jesus gives us new clothes to wear and new wine to drink. Levi, the man who made people pay unfair taxes, abandoned his dishonest and profitable profession and put on the new garments of Jesus and drank of the new wine. Today Jesus Jesus also offers this to you and to me!

With the advent of Jesus, a new era dawned. This text challenges us as a congregation, and each one of us to act in a new way in a new world or to think differently and do things differently. *“A new era requires creativity from believers.”* Creativity means to think and to act in a fresh and new way. That is what renewal / growth in faith or reform means! Religious customs, petty little usages must be tested continuously against the intentions of the Gospel and be purified in terms of these.

We in the church should guard against standing still at the crossroads. We have a wonderful opportunity in South Africa to become a church that really matters. We can, here on our own turf, make a difference in a heartbroken world. It is therefore necessary to make sure that we walk the walk on the new road of Jesus. We are living in a new way, we are looking at people in a new way and we serve in a new and creative way.

4. How do you see Jesus?

St Luke 9: 18-27

“Who do you say I am?”

Jesus’s question to his disciples: *“Who do you say I am?”* does indeed have great implications. It has consequences for me and for you who believe in Him. Jesus is, at any rate, not interested in what other people think and say about Him. He is interested what His followers, you and I, think about Him. Jesus wants to know how you and I see Him and experience Him. Peter, as the spokesperson of the first group of followers, is the first one to respond to this question. He responds without hesitation and, so it seems, with confidence: “You are the Christ!” Peter’s reply sounds like a confession, does it not?

But Jesus reacts to this confession in a strange, enigmatic way. He does not confirm or deny what Peter has said. He does not tell Peter: “Good for you, I like what you are saying”. No, Jesus does something strange. He forbids Peter and his companions to

share the subject of this conversation with others! I wonder if Jesus, by saying this, did not want them to share the picture they had of Him with others, because they did not realize the full implication, the consequences of Peter's response. The response of Peter a few verses further on drives home this point! Jesus already knew what was going to happen.

The Son of Man

Jesus was hesitant about referring to Himself as "the Christ" (the Messiah), as Peter has confessed. According to the Gospels, he rather refers to Himself as the "Son of Man" (as in verse 312). It is here, especially, before His earthly life came to an end, that Jesus refers to Himself as the "Son of man". This is a rich term with more than one meaning. The term "Son of man" has to do, particularly, with the suffering and self-sacrifice of Jesus. It is about his supreme sacrifice for the sake of us. But the One who brings sacrifices is also the One who judges and who saves.

We first read about the Son of Man in the book of Daniel, in chapter 7. There it is written about the One who at the end of time will come to make God's kingdom visible and establish it among the people. On that day he will come to judge the living and the dead. But he will also act as Saviour (St Mark 13:26 – 27). As the Son of Man Jesus is Saviour and Judge in the same breath (Stephan Joubert).

The Son of Man saves by healing the sick and forgiving sinners. He looks for people who are lost. He touches people who are rejected, He changes people's hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, who will have compassion for the least among us. He gives hope and bring peace to those who are ready and who open themselves up to His Grace. He calls the least among us, His brothers (Mathew 25). He tests His followers against the norm of love and compassion and will at the end of time pass judgment over all.

Peter immediately confessed with his lips, but it was only later that he did it with his life. Who you say Jesus is, will be made manifest in and through your life! What you confess does have implications. For the sake of Jesus, it appears to me from the text, that my own interests are pushed aside. By my actions I show that I believe that Jesus was truly raised from the dead and that He lives. For this there is a price to be paid. And it requires from us understanding and acceptance, or at the least, serious consideration of other people's response to Jesus's question.

We are living in an exciting era. There is a new enthusiasm for spiritual depth in the Christian faith. A contemporary, responsible way of believing, renewal and a sense of mission is busy developing. Our text highlights Jesus's personal question: "Who do you say I am?"

Do I really mean what I confess? Is it evident in my life?

Jesus really wants us to honestly reflect on who He is for us, for me, for you, knowing that He is not the same for any two of His followers. No two relationships are after all the same. And Jesus knew this according to the implications of the aforementioned question. He is careful that believers do not describe Him in too easy a fashion, according to their own insights (stereotyping).

Jesus puts the question, because He knows that he had already been presented in a different manner. Even His most faithful followers blundered when it came to the question as to who He was, what His identity were. This makes me think about a true incident which happened at a station in Washington. A violinist was sitting outside on the street playing difficult works of well-known composers. As he was playing Franz Schubert's "Ave Maria", about 1070 people hurriedly walked past. Only 27 stopped to drop a few coins in his violin case. The violinist name was Joshua Bell who, in that same year, was awarded the prize as the best classical musician in the USA. With his 3.5 million dollar violin he filled the music halls night after night. At the station he was overlooked because he was "out of place". Jesus looked, spoke and acted differently from what people expected the Messiah to do (Stephan Joubert).

Jesus wants to know how you see Him and how you think and feel about Him. Moreover, He is not interested what other people say about Him, but it is your opinion that counts with Him. "*Who do you say He is?*" Because you are important to Him. He wants you to know Him and not only serve Him in name only. It is so important not just to end with a confession, but it should direct our hearts, thoughts and our deeds. We ought to follow Him, lives ought to testify about Him. And if someone ask you who Jesus is, it will be your actions that will radiate something of His image, His identity and His love. Your actions speak louder than your words.

5. Who then is important?

- St Luke 9:46-48; St Luke 18: 15-17

The well-known artist and priest, Father Claerhout, made a representation of Mathew 25 on a large canvas. He painted least important people, those whom Jesus called his brothers and sisters. But he also included a child, who had not even been listed under those least important people.

Children are on the whole not regarded as important

In Biblical times, children were owned by their fathers. Fathers had the right on their children's lives. Children were mostly regarded as nuisances. In Luke 18 it is Jesus's disciples who wanted to keep the children away from Jesus. They felt that Jesus had more important things to do; the children would unnecessarily distract him. But how blind these disciples were! The poor, the weak, the simple, the least among us are taken note of by Jesus in an extraordinary way. And these definitely also include children. Children do have a special place in the new world of Jesus.

In our world today things do not look too good for children – it seems as if they are not so important. People tend to ignore children, they don't even hear when children are calling.

Millions of children right across the world are living in extremely wretched conditions and are dying because of poverty related factors. Researchers say that about 5,7 million or 32% of all South African children will have lost one or both parents by the year 2015 due to HIV/Aids. A recent survey found that only 23% of learners feel safe in their school. One out of four girls and one out of eight boys have

already been molested by the time they are sixteen years old. There are more than 200 000 child labourers in our country. Today we have very good laws that protect human rights – even better than most other countries. But injustices are still committed against our children. Most of the time these young ones are voiceless. At traffic intersections we all look the other way when these little beggars threaten to invade our privacy.

Jesus cares for his children.

In St Luke 9 we read how the adults – his disciples, of all people! – argue among themselves as to who is the most important person. Jesus draws a small child near to him. This little one is important, Jesus tells them. Everyone who loves and cares for a child, is in fact doing it to Jesus himself. And, says Jesus, “whoever is the least among you, he is great”. Jesus turns our whole idea about who is important and who not – our values - upside down. Children, and everyone who becomes like a child, are important to Him.

In Luke 18 we read about people, probably a number of mothers and fathers, who bring their children to Jesus so that He can lay His hands on them and pray for them. These children were lucky. At least somebody cared for them. It was the disciples that were rude. In today’s terms we could say they were like a number of church people who are not kindly disposed towards children, who still do not understand that the Lord looks differently at people.

If we can learn something from Jesus’s attitude to children, it is that He thinks and does things differently than his disciples. He does not act in accordance with the culture and customs of His day. He makes space for children and He always has time for them. He shows that children are special in God’s eyes. It is in the nature of Jesus to also involve himself in the life of naughty children. His enemies have all along accused him of consorting with sinners, wine-imbibers and gluttons.

Do we really care for children?

How happy are our children in the congregation? What do they think about the adults who follow Jesus? Are they still being threatened with words such as “If you don’t keep quiet Jesus will punish you”? In the congregation the verger used to pull the ears of children who opened their eyes during minister’s long prayer. Is the saying “children must be seen and not heard” still current? Do our children feel free to talk to us about things that happen to them.

And where do the street children, the Aids orphans, the abused children meet with Jesus? Just the other day I heard a church minister verbally abuse some street children who had left smudges on his car with their dirty hands. Of course, many of these children are not angels. They steal, snuff glue, smokkel dagga and attack people with knives. It is also true that they take their chances and that the compassion shown to them does not always have the desired effect.

We do not know what the circumstances were of the child in Luke 9 that Jesus drew near to him. It did not matter. Jesus accepted the children unconditionally. He touched them and embraced them. Jesus knows that it is good for children to be touched. Researchers have pointed out that babies do not develop well if they are not

touched. They believe that parents do not touch their children enough. Wilhelm Jordaan wonders if this touching does not release something that is necessary to really become human. He writes: with young children touching represents a deep-seated need to find safety in the company of somebody one can trust (Die Burger 19/102010). Jesus creates this trust.

I don't know if you have read the story of Koos Visserman, which somebody by the name of Ronel posted on the internet: *The south coast has a rich variety of characters; he is one of them. He has a heart of gold and is known to start drinking as early as 4 'o clock in the morning. But in the 10 years I have known him, I have never seen him drunk. Having said that, I have never seen him sober also. All that I know is that the government has not created "a haven for neglected children" as he has done. In a totally informal manner he and his "plain Jane" of a wife who goes by the name of "Capie" – where she got this name from I do not know, because she is Portuguese and can only speak Afrikaans ... buy food, and bags of those factory cookies, and Nik-Naks and cooldrink...and the gates are open...and the children move in and out like lines of ants. NOT ONE CHILD in Shelley Beach goes without food over a weekend; neither are they cold, or wet, or without love... not as long as Koos Visserman lives...*

To whom does the kingdom of God actually belong? To those who this morning arrives in their Mercedes Benz cars, attired in their formal church clothes and take up their places in the church pews, who afterwards takes wide berth around Koos Visserman at the Spar, or Koos Visserman who says: "You know Chris, if the ocean were to change into a brandy, and if I had one wish to make, it would be for a half jack in my back pocket in cases of "emergency"...

To who does the kingdom of God really belong...? She ends her story with a question.

And do we ourselves become like children?

From the events reported in Luke 9, his disciples should have known that Jesus cares for children. They should have known who Jesus regards as the most important! Jesus warns against pride. He says we should not think too much of ourselves; we must become like these children. We should not misunderstand Jesus. It does not mean that we have to start sucking our dummies in order to gain his approval. It does not mean that we do not have to use our heads and not act like adults. No, what Jesus meant is that we should learn to believe like children. We should know that we cannot become part of his kingdom by trusting our own abilities and achievements, but only through grace. We must learn to trust Jesus in a childlike manner.

Jesus says: "Do you know, if other people treat you as a good friend, then they are my friends also. Every good deed shown to children, is actually shown to Me. And when they treat Me as a friend, then they are also a friend to my Father" (Luke 9:48).

6. The church is on the move

St Luke 10:1 - 16

We are all missionaries

The church, each congregation exists, because God sent people. It is ordinary people, people like you and me, who are missionaries of God. This mission of God is outward. The first followers of Jesus were missionaries; they were known as “people of the Way”. There were not many of them – about 70 followers were sent to the towns and non-church places, where very few people like Jesus were prepared to live and move around (Stephan Joubert).

Our text section tells us about the first missionaries. One would have liked to pause at some of the text verses and the things that were written, but this message wants to help us to think differently on what it means to be part of the church. It wants to help us to understand that we are missionaries and that we should live everywhere and always as missionaries.

Congregations are making exciting new discoveries. They have discovered that the intention should not be to make God part of our plans. No, we should become part of God’s plan, part of God’s movement to the world. This what Frederick Marais of *Communitas*, the place where contemplation on the nature of the church takes place, has to say. He says: “It is not so much about the interests of the congregation, but to distinguish God’s will and to take note where God is active. We need to get ourselves on to God’s road.

We have been sent to spread the good news through our words and by our deeds.

We are all missionaries We have been called to spread the good news on a fulltime basis, whether we are just in receipt of a pension, or work in somebody’s garden, are working in an office, are looking for work, attend school, have attended school or have never been to school. We can spread the gospel when we do our shopping at Shoprite, when we sit in the taxi, or when we have to stand in long queues.

This makes me think about the story of Francis of Assisi, the well-known priest from the Middle Ages. On one occasion he invited a young priest to accompany him to the town to go and preach. In the streets they stop to greet the people and to talk to the hawkers; eventually they arrive by a different route back at the monastery. The young priest is taken aback and he reminds Francis that the intention was to go and preach, to which he replied: “My son, we have preached. Many people have seen us. They have scrutinised our behaviour and checked our attitude. They listened when we were speaking. So, you could say that we did deliver a sermon.” Stephan Joubert says that he has learned that he just has to report daily to God and to anyone who crosses his path. His life must be a walking advertising board for God’s grace.

The mission of Jesus is driven by our love for Him, the love that is expressed in our interaction with other people. His love is burning in our hearts and we cannot but share it with others. The small things that we do, the friendly words, recognition of

other people's humanity. All these are like little mustard seed which God in his grace allows to grow. It is not about teaching people the gospel so that they can become converted, but rather to introduce people who cross our path to the good news, especially to show it by our own lives and love.

For this reason the church building is not so important

This congregation does not belong to the church building, to the church council, not even to the members, but it belongs to God. Because it belongs to him, we put it at the disposal of others. The existence of the church is no longer dependent on the building. The church is in the process of moving away from the building to the community around it and beyond the man-made boundaries of culture and class. We are being sent into the world by Jesus.

This somehow works to one's advantage, as it sometimes happen that one feels ashamed of our church building and its facilities, which does not compare favourably with those of other churches that I have visited. What a church looks like is, after all, not what the idea of the church is all about. This congregation exists for the sake of the Lord's kingdom. And He does not send us to one another, but to places and people where the Lord Himself plans to go or where He is already busy working.

And we may travel light

Jesus's missionaries always travel light. The traditions and customs may become so heavy that it constrains our movement. It can happen that congregations turn inward, that they get stuck on one way of doing things and spending all their time on that which they have and maintaining it. This makes me think about the story of David and Goliath. David the young and ordinary shepherd is prepared to engage the giant super warrior Goliath in combat. He get advice to put on heavy armour. He knows he does not stand a chance at any rate against his opponent. Maybe he should at least steel himself against Goliath. David knows, however, that this will not work and he decides to use that with which he is familiar. The end result is known to us all. Jesus does not send us with a bag full of evangelical equipment and qualifications, with fully packaged programmes and strategies' but with his love and nearness to the other, especially those others who are so different from us.

7. Jesus enjoys dining out

St Luke 14: 15-24

There is one thing on which all South Africans agree. Not all of us enjoy soccer or rugby, but most of us enjoys good food, especially to dine out. Jesus also dined out. In the Bible there are wonderful stories where Jesus dined out with his friends. Think about the wedding feast where he turned water into wine. Or the night before the crucifixion when Jesus had supper with His friends, his disciples. This was the occasion where he introduced the communion. Jesus was also the perfect host; he fed thousands of people at the same time.

Invitation to the feast

In Luke 14 we find the story of Jesus where he sits at the table of his host, a Pharisee. He tells three parables to the guests. All this takes place around the table. I am going to read the third parable that Jesus related at the table of the Pharisee ...

The Pharisees were very religious people. During the meal Jesus had the opportunity to show to these religious people what He thinks of their religion. Through the story he told, he demonstrated how little compassion they had for people who did not hold any high position.

Jesus also teaches me and you who God really is, what He means to us and what He expects from us. One of the guests at the table with Jesus said: "Lucky is the man who can sit down at the banquet in the kingdom of God." What he was actually saying would sound like this in the ordinary language of The Message: "What a privilege it would be to stay in God's new world. It must be one great feast". This man can envision the glory of God's kingdom, but he did not know how he can get there. He is blind to the enormity of God's grace.

Do we accept the invitation?

In this story we hear how God invites people, but also how people reject his invitation. These people who were originally invited, so we are told, were very selfish. Their own business interests were regarded as being more important than the person who invited them to the feast. If one considers that even a woman was regarded in those days as part of a man's property, then it becomes clear that all the excuses had to do with possessions (land, oxen, a woman). My possessions can come between me and the giver of all possessions. And the time will come when God will no longer send out invitations; it will then be too late to sit down at the heavenly banquet.

God sends his Son Jesus Christ in the same way the host send out his servant to invite the needy of this world to the banquet in his kingdom.

This testimony is strongly reminiscent of the parable of the prodigal son. It was the privileged elder brother who refused to take part in the feast. In the same way the privileged invitees came up with excuses and did not attend the feast. The younger brother feasted together with his father; the elder brother was, like the spoiled brat he was, furious and boycotted the feast. The younger brother, one could say, was like the poor, the crippled and the blind, who had taken up the places of the very important people. The poor, the crippled and the blind, all of them people who know how much they need the Lord; it does not matter what the state of their health or their station in society – they are important to God.

When Jesus dined out with those who were rejected by society, it served as an advance notice. He gives a foretaste of that which God has already decided to do: to welcome to his heavenly table the outcasts, the poor, the sick, those who know how dependent they are on God, yes everyone who believes in our Saviour.

Who are the people that we invite?

Who do you invite for dinner? Is it not so that we only invite our friends and family or people with whom we can transact business? In this way we make sure that we will be getting something back. Jesus thinks differently about this than we do. He thinks like his Father thinks. Jesus calls you and me to be kind to people who cannot recompense you (verse 12 – 14). Think about all the unimportant people, the unloved ones, those who are unwelcome and are not noticed in your environment. God himself will reward you for this. Listen how this text sounds in a modern day version of The Message: “If you invite people like these, you are a very lucky person. They might not even bring you a bunch of flowers, or they may not be able to afford to buy a thank you card. It does not matter, because God sees what you are doing.”

The gospel Jesus in fact has to do with the filling of empty stomachs, taking care of the poor, concrete showing of compassion to those who are hurt, exposing injustice and searching for that which is good and true and right.

God is the great host who is eager to have everyone share in his mercy. His plan of redemption is meant for everyone. It wants to include everyone. Do not miss this feast!

8. Jesus speaks out against injustice

St Luke 9: 45-48

Why then is Jesus so angry?

Everyone has their off-days; they sometimes do get angry. But to see Jesus as angry as that is quite scary. The evangelists Matthew and Mark describe this in more detail. He was incensed. He turned over chairs and tables. He chased people out of the building, using a whip. It is indeed strange to see Jesus, who are so compassionate and soft, act like this. Did Jesus have an off-day? One may well wonder: was He perhaps tired, irritated? Or could it be that Jesus did not approve of any business being transacted at the Temple? Would he have objected today to a church bazaar? No, his anger was directed at something different.

It was a normal thing for traders to sell sacrificial animals to people who visited the Temple. There were also currency dealers. Their job was to exchange foreign coins for Jewish coins. Only the Jewish coins could be dropped into the offering boxes. Some of this money was used to buy pigeons and sometimes larger animals such as lambs. The traders only accepted Jewish money. A portion of the profits went towards the maintenance of the temple service. It was business as usual. Why then did Jesus react in this manner?

Because other people were excluded

The explanation for this can be found in Jesus's words which He quoted from Isaiah 56:7. In Isaiah 56:7 it is envisioned of how non-Jews might also worship together with Jews in the temple. Everyone who believes in Him, should be able

to come and worship there. He says: in my house of prayer I will give joy to all nations; their sacrifices would be acceptable to me.

The area between the external walls and the actual temple was known as the inner court. This is the area to which the foreigners, the rejected, the least among them, the crippled, the sick, the slaves and subfarmers were allowed. They could worship God in this area. But this area had been filled with traders' kiosks and the tables of currency dealers. There was no place for other people. The people who wanted to worship were therefore excluded from the place of worship.

There was a time in our country when black people were not allowed to worship in certain "white" churches. Later on some of these white congregations made their church halls available for services to black people. Today one could compare the inner court of the temple to the church halls of today. If a church hall was to be used to raise funds for the preservation of the congregation and is no longer accessible to black believers, then one could compare it to the circumstances in the temple which made Jesus angry.

The religious activities became more and more inwardly directed. The preservation of the Jewish religion robbed the other people of their worshipping space.

Because other people were exploited

Jesus was probably also upset because the currency dealers were manipulating the exchange rate to their own advantage. Those on the outside were exploited. They had to exchange a lot of their money for less Jewish money. Today we find that foreign tourists have to pay more for products. There is no end to the exploitation of foreigners (strangers). Jesus noticed a similar type of wrong-doing in the temple. No wonder He calls the house of prayer a nest of robbers. He referred to Jeremiah 7:11. Jeremiah stood at the entrance to the temple and warned the people of Judah and Jerusalem that God was not present there where the temple stood. God is present where justice is done. Their faith is shown by their life and their deeds. They must stop the injustice against the strangers, the orphans, the widows and the innocent. These and other evils such as murder, theft, adultery made the house that was known as the House of the Lord, a cave of robbers.

The Lord did not condemn the buying and selling at the temple, but he was extremely upset by the attitude, the insensitivity, the selfishness and even the injustice that went hand-in-hand with the mercantile practices.

How open (accessible) is our congregation to others?

With what do we as congregation keep ourselves busy? How open are we really to other people? Are we busy preserving traditions and staring ourselves blind at customs which hinder us from seeing or distinguishing God's will? Or are we a congregation that is on a mission, on the way to outsiders and open to all people who seek God or to people to whom God sends us?

Jesus who purifies the temple, did not take a day off. He was up and about. He was finely attuned to justice and became upset when he observed injustices being committed. His message is about His grace that is meant for all people, from which nobody is to be excluded. It is through Him that everyone, black and white, male and female, can get free access to God. The wall separating people from one another has finally been broken down. It cost him His life to break down the separation in the temple. His blood purifies us from the sin of disunity among believers. It creates a new humanity where believers know and help carry each other's burdens, where they need one another, and together serve all God's people, even those who do not know Him. That is why it is so important that we believers do not hinder other people to come and worship with us.

9. We look at the King

St Luke 23: 26-43

Actually one should, after one has read this section, just be quiet. It reminds one of the film *The passion of the Christ*. At the end of the film the viewers were stripped of everything and were stunned.

The King was hanging on the cross!

Still one cannot keep quiet if one compares Jesus's compassion for people with the cruelty of people. He had pity for especially those vulnerable people and he helped them. St Luke sketches the involvement of Jesus with particularly the poor, with women, children, tax collectors and Samaritans. Moreover Jesus forgives transgressors right up to the end, such as when showed grace to the dying criminal on the cross next to Him.

But let us now look how St Luke describes how the crucifixion of Jesus proceeded. The Jewish leaders take Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor, to stand trial. Jesus is indicted on three charges (23:2): that He has misled the people and incited them to riot, that He stopped the people from paying taxes and that He claimed to be the king of the Jews.

The Jewish leaders were shrewd. They changed the religious charge into a political charge. In our day and age it is still not strange for people to colour in their religious prejudices politically, or vice versa. In order to get their way they made him out to be a threat to the authority of Rome. Pilate then asked Jesus: "You are the king of the Jews, is it not?" To which Jesus replied: "Those are your words" (verse 3). The evangelist John writes that Jesus answered: "My kingdom is not of this world..." And when Pilate asked him the second time, Jesus replied: "It is as you say: I am a king" (John 18:36).

Pilate was convinced that Jesus did not pose any threat to Ceasar and that Jesus did not intend to rise against the might of Rome. Therefore he declares Jesus to be innocent. But later he gives in. The Biblical commentator Barclay is of the opinion

that Pilate was blackmailed by the Jewish leaders. His position was at stake. The mass protest was perhaps just strong enough to make him anxious.

Luke, so it seems to me, only mentions the inscription on the cross in verse 38, while John the evangelist writes more on this. Pilate has the last say. He punishes the Jewish leaders when he goes against their wishes and orders that the inscription should read: *This is the king of the Jews* (John 19:21). Thus Jesus is recognized as king in the inscription, not something that Jesus would have said or pretended to be, but as an official statement – in writing – of the Roman authority Pilate. The inscription was written, according to John, in Hebrew, in Greek and in Latin. It was there for everyone, for the whole world, to read and to understand.

The king is mocked by the people

But even though the inscription on the cross recognizes that Jesus is King, it was also a way to mock Him. Just think:

- King Jesus hangs helplessly nailed to a cross while the soldiers tear down His last vestige of dignity and divide His garments among them, as if they were busy disrobing a monarch. Jesus is humiliated, despised, scorned and ridiculed by the Jewish leaders and the soldiers. “He is stripped of everything, the earth rejects Him and the heavens do not accept Him”, writes the Bible commentator Greijdanus.
- The soldiers challenge Jesus: “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”
- Jesus was crucified between two criminals, the one on his left side, and the other one on his right side. This actually means that Jesus, because of the fact that He was hung in the middle, was considered to be the worst of the three criminals. And yet He had not been charged with any crime or found guilty thereof (verse 38).
- James’s and John’s request to Jesus (Mark 10: 35-45) that when He reigns as king, they be allowed to sit at His left side and right side, reminds one of the criminals who hung on both sides of Jesus’s cross. The brothers were asking for a place of honour in God’s kingdom. Because they did not understand the (future) suffering and the events surrounding the cross of Christ, they dared to put this selfish, self-serving request to Jesus.

It was the criminal who recognized and honoured Jesus

The one dying criminal next to Jesus was led to believe in the kingship of Jesus and followed Him in His path of the cross. It is remarkable that it was precisely this criminal that could understand the kingship of Jesus. After all that had happened, the disciples of Jesus could still not understand, because they expected a political Messiah.

Jesus is the king that does not come in glory to liberate his people from his enemies by force, but rather a king that come as a servant to serve and to suffer. Jesus gives an entirely new meaning to kingship. He does not overpower by might, but conquers with love and compassion.

One is touched by how the dying criminal's faith in Jesus saved him. He receives a Saviour. Jesus gives him the assurance: "Today you will be with Me in paradise." "Paradise is indicative of a place where God is, where there is no sin or the marks of sin (suffering, loneliness, hatred, etc.)..." Jesus takes him under His protection and offers him security and eternal bliss, and this not one day, but on this particular day. Jesus begins His kingdom with his first actual subject: a murderer, writes Murray Janson.

Marelise Bekker, a youth worker and a co-worker in the congregation is intensively engaged in an industrial school in their town. She says: There is so much negativity and heartbreak in the world. People are negative, and look with such negativity to themselves and to the world around them, that they are beginning to increase the burden of their own brokenness and pessimism. If one finds oneself in such a dark pit, anything that comes your way, often provides a solution. It could be crime, sex, drugs, violence – literally anything. So this vicious circle of brokenness perpetuates itself and people's self-image and their world view keep on collapsing.

She tells in a touching manner how the story of the death of Jesus was revealed to these young people. Earlier on she had found that young people could not really identify with Jesus. Perhaps, in their frame of reference, He was too good to be true. Until a young boy one day provided the key to this: I find it difficult to identify with Jesus on the cross, he said in his way; but with the murderers on the cross I could identify easily. Me and my life are like theirs, he said. "Bu I can do what that one murderer did; I can turn to Jesus." After this she concentrated in her stories on the murderer – and by this many young lives were touched (Marelize's story of hope was sent by Danie Mouton to Communitas Advent 2008).

When you find yourself in a state of hopelessness, you may also turn to the King and may walk next to the King and share His hope and redemption with others. Because the kingdom is the business of the church, of our congregation, no other organization is in a position to serve the message of physical and spiritual welfare in such a manner.

The kingdom of God is not bound to any one country or nation, but to anyone who believes in Him. His kingdom is found in strange places. It is where His followers found themselves and recognize Him as King.

10. To be guided by the living Word

St Luke 24: 13-35

Do you know that without words, thoughts remain unknown. If you want someone to know your thoughts, then you use words; you talk to that person, don't you? If you see a stranger and he or she does not talk to you, then you will not get to know that person. You would not know where that person is coming from or where he or she is going. Such a person will remain a stranger.

The stranger on the road

Luke tells us about the two people in intense conversation with each other about what had transpired in Jerusalem the past couple of days. They were followers of Jesus. They were in all likelihood the married couple, Klopas and Maria. They were disillusioned, angry and deeply disappointed, on their way home to Emmaus, a small town about 11 km from Jerusalem. As they were walking and talking a stranger approached and joined them on their way. He asked what the topic of the conversation was that they were so seriously engaged in. They looked at him in surprise and asked "Are you the only one in these parts who did not know what happened to Jesus of Nazareth?" The stranger, who we know now was Jesus, feigned ignorance. They then related what happened to the prophet. That he was sentenced to death. They had hoped that He would be the one to deliver Israel from the yoke of the Romans. Now He was dead. Some women, it appeared, caused further confusion. They went to the tomb in the early hours of the morning and found that the tomb was empty. Apparently angels appeared to them and assured them that He was alive.

Through the Word and through bread eyes are opened

Jesus appeared to be annoyed at them for not believing what the prophets had said. He then explained the Scriptures to them concerning Christ. The two still do not know who the stranger is. They also do not ask Him who He is. To them Jesus remains a stranger. It looked as if it did not bother Jesus that they did not recognize Him. When they reached the town of Emmaus, Jesus tested them by making as if He wanted to proceed further on. But, lo and behold, they asked Him to spend the night with them. One would not know if they did this because they wanted to be hospitable and/or whether they found him interesting and wanted to gain more of his insights. As was to be expected, Jesus accepts their invitation.

But the guest conducts him host-like at the table. As often during His earthly actions and interactions with people Jesus shows his fondness of dining out with companions. And in the same manner as he had earlier multiplied and handed out the bread just as He did at the last Supper, He broke the bread and gave it to the two. Jesus has Communion, not with the initiated and the converted as we would normally do in church, but He has it with doubters, fugitives and the helpless (Stephan Joubert).

Then the eyes of the two were opened and they recognized Jesus. Immediately Jesus vanished. It was as if He wanted them to make the discovery and then His mission would be complete.

They then confessed to each other that their hearts were warmed when on the road Jesus spoke to them and explained the Scriptures to them. It was if the Word, which had become flesh, of which John the evangelist had testified, had taken on a special meaning for these two. We also see that together the Word and the bread brought the gospel home.

The story began with two followers who were shattered by the events of the past few days. Their despair was changed into hope, when their eyes opened and they

recognized Jesus. Jesus was truly raised from the dead. But it is not mere coincidence that Jesus acts as a stranger in the story.

What about the strangers on our road?

The message could have ended with the appeal that we should take the living word with us on our life's journey; but we should not lose sight of the fact that strangers occupy a special place in the gospel of Luke. On the road to Emmaus Jesus was a stranger to two of his followers. The two allowed Him to walk with them. It shows that they opened themselves to the stranger. Luke emphasises the point that the followers of Jesus are open to the stranger that crosses their path. We talk to one another, we listen to one another and we learn from one another. We invite one another to our inner sanctum. We are hospitable towards one another, also to strangers. Thus we show that our eyes have been opened to the Stranger that became our Host.

Travelling thus on the road with all of God's people we come to the realization of how broad and how high and how deep His love is.

11. Our bond with Jesus has a price

Acts 4:32-37

Bound together in one congregation

What binds our congregation? Is the bond that we share visible to others? In other words, how do we appear to outsiders? The acts of the first congregation makes one ponder these questions, does it not?

In the first community of Christians one could notice how they were one in Christ and particularly in the way they handled their finances. They shared all earthly possessions with one another. Nobody had too little or too much. And yet these members of the first congregation voluntarily shared their possessions with others. This text in no way suggests that private property was prohibited. We do not have to become red and promote communism as the church's political and economic model.

But this part of Scripture encourages healthy debate. The description of "one heart and soul" (4:32) says a lot about the first congregation that consisted of a variety of cultural groups. They were bound together by more than human factors. They were one through the blood of Christ. A stronger bond than this could not be found anywhere else.

How do faith fit into our everyday lives? More important: how do other people see and experience this? Acts 4 tells the story about how the first Christians reacted in a totally different manner with their lives to the Easter events. Luke tells us here of a community that were so different with regard to the existing norms and values of their time.

Being one means to care for one another...and for others

It was precisely in the unity and charitableness, the way they thought about their possessions, that this first community took root. These values were infectious. Yet we do read in Acts 6 that things went wrong and that some widows were neglected. The leaders of the congregation, however, addressed the crisis and the situation was restored. Therefore it is not strange that God used this way of being a congregation, this caring for one another and the genuine bond of love among them, as an instrument to add new people everyday to the congregation. Something of the basic Word and bread ministry was visible in the first congregation.

Paul has adjudged that the intimate community within the body of Christ also has implications for our finances. He uses the same word *koinonia*, which we translate into English with the word “fellowship”, to explain what happens when believers divide money amongst themselves. It is no longer about mutual caring within one congregation, but equal caring (1 Corinthians 12:25) and financial equilibrium (2 Corinthians 8: 14) among congregations.

It is true that today we live in a complicated context. The community of those days were quite different. This part of Scripture do, however, challenge our situation. Suffice it to be reminded that the first congregation’s members interacted with one another in a way different to what was customary at the time.

This part of Scripture does not provide us with a blueprint (does not prescribe to us) how we should organise life in our congregation, but we can take note of their interaction with one another. Some of the principles are still applicable in congregations like ours. Phew! The temptation is great to spiritualize these values of the text, that it requires no price and that does not have any practical implications. Selfishness and self-interest do not have a place in the church of God. The cost to a community of believers of breaking down boundaries of race, class and culture is enormous.

One cannot but think of the sin of race-centred congregations, how it brings about and perpetuates financial inequality. The gap between rich and poor congregations is mainly found to be racially bound. This certainly cannot be regarded as being Christian!

The Belhar Confession believes *that this unity of the people of God (Philippians 2:1-5) must be visibly manifested and operable in a variety of ways, in that we should love one another (1 Corinthians 12:4-31), experience, pursue and practise community with one another (John 13:1-17); in that we are guilty of not giving ourselves voluntarily and with joy to the benefit and as a blessing to each other(1 Corinthians 1:10-13); in that we share one faith, one mission, are one of soul and sense, have one God and father (Ephesians 4:1-6; Ephesians 3:14-20).*

The mission statement of the Dutch Reformed Church reads: *Jesus the head of the church sends us “ to be unconditionally serviceable in the world with openness. We would love to join hands with other Christians to built our society and to relieve painful circumstances. We want to encourage, guide and equip one another as congregations with love to become involved in the healing of our land. We are available and are committed to service to communities. We thank the Lord for the*

dedication of members and the countless positive actions of which we learn from all over. As believers who have been sent on a mission; we are the salt of the earth and a light to the world. We stand in service of the coming of God's kingdom.

We are called upon to:

- to put the interests of others first
- to develop an eye for the destitute
- to show warmth to those in need
- to accept everyone with open arms

Congregations do not only testify of “a life with the other”, but of “a life for the other”. We are called upon to self-sacrifice and selflessness and to do good and seek after that which is right. We have been sent out to look for one another on both sides of the railroad, to serve each other spiritually and financially, to enrich and to bless one another.

12. Do not mess with our elderly

Acts 6:1-7

The elderly are neglected

I find it heartbreaking every time I hear of an old lady or an old gentleman who is wronged and who is treated unfairly. The aged are so vulnerable. It is especially those who have been widowed, those who are alone, who struggle financially, who become easy prey to the unscrupulous. Sometimes these unscrupulous people are their own children or grandchildren. They live off these old people's pensions, steal from them, deceive them, bully and even assault them.

Wrongs committed against the elderly are not something new. In Biblical times the widows in particular had a hard time. Most Jewish women were not allowed to earn an income. And when their husbands died, they became destitute and dependent on favours from others. That is why God, so typical of His nature, made provision for help to the widows (Deuteronomy 24:19-21; 29). We read that God punishes those who discriminate against widows and who treat them unjustly (Exodus 22:22). God blesses those who help the widows (Isaiah 1:17-18).

In Acts we read about the first conflict in the first congregation. And lo and behold, the crisis was about elderly people in the congregation who were wronged. The victims were mostly Greek speaking. To me it appears as if they practised double standards in this congregation. Let me explain:

The congregation consisted of Aramaic- and Greek-speaking Jews. There were two camps in Palestine: a large group of Aramaic-speaking people who refused to speak Greek, and those Jews who spoke Greek.

The Greek-speaking people protested against what they saw as the neglect in the daily care of “their” widows. It seems as if the neglect had been going on for some time. It is possible that there were many Greek-speaking widows and that there were

not enough resources available. It was also possible that these widows went to Jerusalem at a very late stage in their lives to settle there, to be buried in or near the holy city. Furthermore, they did not have family nearby who could take care of them and they found themselves to a large extent dependent on charity. It is also possible that the Aramaic-speaking people felt that with the increase in the membership of the congregation, the Greek-speaking ones should only be entitled to second-rate care. It appears that the care of the widows was largely in the hands of the Aramaic speakers. The well-known Biblical commentator William Barclay even suggests that the Greek speakers were looked down upon with a sort of spiritual snobism and that the widows of this group were probably deliberately neglected. He might have taken it a bit too far.

The congregation makes a plan: more leaders are elected

Luckily the apostles, the first leaders of the congregation, took the conflict seriously. After they became aware of the conflict they immediately called a meeting of the congregation and addressed the congregation. First they stated the problem (6.2b), then they provided a solution (6:3) and lastly we read about the outcome of the solution (6:4).

The solution to the problem is really dealt with in a clever and effective way. We can learn something from this. The apostles do not take a decision unilaterally and actually create a spirit of participation by calling the whole congregation together.

The chief task of the apostles was to spread the gospel and to pray. They could not neglect this ministry in order to take care of the widows. The Greek-speaking widows were the victims in the decision. Their daily needs were not taken care of. The apostles were not able to take care of all the needy people.

For this reason they proposed to the congregation to choose seven men to take over charge of the caring for widows. This solution also led to a change in the leadership structure within the congregation.

The seven were appointed to address a specific problem in the congregation. They had to perform a task, but the seven were not limited to the concrete caretaking of widows. We read, for example, that two of the deacons, Stephen and Philip, were powerful preachers and that they performed miracles as well.

To be a leader, means to serve

The proposal by the apostles met with the approval of the entire congregation. It also did not take the congregation long to put words into action. Seven men were elected as deacons. Although the manner in which the seven were elected is not discussed, their election was confirmed by way of laying on of hands. It was an old Jewish custom to indicate that someone had been singled out for a specific task (Numbers 27:23). To serve others was a big task, therefore they had to be properly equipped.

The seven had to meet certain requirements. They had to be filled with the Spirit and had to have wisdom. The spiritual qualification may be understood in different ways. However, one could take it to mean that it refers to those people who dedicate themselves fully to Jesus and who show the power of the Lord in their lives. The

wisdom perhaps refers to moral, spiritual and practical wisdom. It would under the circumstances also include a sense of justice. Other guidelines in the designation of the seven were that they should be elected from the congregation. And they had to be designated in the presence of the congregation.

It is significant that all of the seven had Greek names. To me it seems a clever choice to have people with Greek names. The group which was discriminated against, was now well represented. They were in the best position to understand the interests of the widows and they could deliver a more dedicated service as a result of their social and cultural ties. I reckon one could talk here of an “antique” definition of affirmative action. The Greek-speaking members of the congregation was a minority group and the Greek-speaking widows experienced great distress.

As the first congregation increased in number, the poor also increased. The organization of the congregation became more complicated. The voluntary giving-up of their possessions by the first Christians (Acts 2:44) was not enough to stop the discrimination in the congregation. Even the apostles, who were regarded as the chief guides of the Gospel, could not stop the discrimination against the Greek-speaking widows. Official structures had to be created to resolve the crisis. More people were now responsible for the functions in the congregation; everything did not now depend on just a few leaders.

Today it is still part of the church’s ministry – to care for people, to minister with love to the needs of the elderly, of children, the sick and the poor. In this way we can show to the world what the heart of the Lord looks like – He, the great Deacon, who ministers to us with His goodness and His Grace.

This work is not confined to some leaders, but we are all called upon to be deacons to one another.

13. The church of the Lord is colour-blind

Acts 8

The book of Acts is full of surprises! This is not surprising, because this book tells us about the acts of God’s Spirit. This narrative invites us to experience power of the Holy Spirit just like the followers of the risen Christ. We invite you now in the Spirit to accompany Philip on God’s mission. Allow me now to read the narrative...

And thus it came to pass that the gospel reached Africa before it came to Europe! Lydia of Philippi was the first Christian on European soil and happens eight chapters after the conversion of the traveller from Africa. We also tend to forget that the first Christian in Africa was not, according to the narrative, a white person.

But allow me to sketch the background to Luke’s story.

Philip the obedient missionary

Philip was a Greek-speaking Jew and one of the seven (21:8) He was not Philip the apostle, but, like the other six helpers, was filled with the Spirit and with wisdom. He and Stephen did not limit their work to the social and physical care of marginalized figures in the first congregation, but they also did some powerful preaching and performed miracles. His story begins after the death of Stephen the martyr. God takes the initiative and the lead in each unfolding of his story.

Philip was one of the first apostles who spread the gospel outside Jerusalem and is considered a pioneer in the early development of the church, which consisted of people from different languages, cultures and races. His huge evangelization campaign in Samaria was interrupted by God so that he could minister to one person. This makes one think about the stories of Jesus in Luke 15, where there is a search for one lost sheep. Philip was ready to follow the path of God, which is meant for everyone. The good news has an inclusive character. God's grace and love is offered to everyone, it breaks through all man-made barriers and prejudices. God calls and sends His followers to strange places, strange people and outsiders; because all people belong to Him.

The Ethiopian seeks after God

The traveller is the one outsider whom God wants Philip to meet. The Angel of the Lord (verse 26) is the one who gives this instruction. Information about the nameless traveller has led to diverse opinions, questions and speculations. He was a black man from Africa who hailed from the area of Ethiopia to the south of Egypt, known as Nubia. Today this area is known as Sudan. He was probably a descendant of Ham. He was a high-ranking official and something like a minister of finance of the Queen of Ethiopia. He is repeatedly described as a eunuch, which most translations render as one who is emasculated.

It seems as if Luke emphasises the fact that the traveller was a eunuch. This naming is repeated five times in the Greek text (verses 26; 34; 36; 38 and 39). It is unfortunate that the word in most Afrikaans texts are translated with the word "ontmande"(emasculated) instead of the word "eunug" (less well-known, but still a recognized Afrikaans word). "Emasculated" is not the only meaning of the word "eunuch". Eunuch is a word with more than one meaning. It could refer to one who is celibate, or one who is impotent, or one who is merely a court official. If one looks at three of Jesus's statements concerning eunuchs in Matthew 19:12, some are born that way, others have been made like that through human ill-treatment, while others prefer to be that way because of their dedication to God.

This eunuch's faith status is not clearly stated. It was probably not important for Luke to say which religion he was an adherent of. He wasn't a Jew, but he was pious. He went to Jerusalem to worship, regardless of the cost. It is not clear whether he was allowed to enter the temple. If he was indeed allowed, it would probably have been to the outer court where the gentiles were allowed. According to the Jewish law (Deuteronomy 23:1), eunuchs are excluded from the assembly of Israel. He could also not gain entry into the nation of Israel through circumcision. One could gather from this that his spiritual needs were not satisfied in Jerusalem. Evidently he

did not find in Jerusalem what he had been looking for and, disappointedly, took the long way back home. Somewhere along the way he obtained a scroll of the book of the prophet Isaiah; he probably paid a lot of money for it in Egypt. He was a marginalized figure in respect of the Jewish religion, even though he was wealthy, literate and of high standing in his own country.

The Lord arranges a meeting

It was not by coincidence that Philip, the evangelist on a mission, and the Ethiopian seeking the face of God, met each other on a lonely road in the desert. God had planned it like this.

As a missionary of the Lord, Philip came across the eunuch on a desolate road between Jerusalem and Gaza as he was sitting on a wagon and reading aloud from the book of Isaiah. A conversation sprang up between the two about the part he was reading. Philip did not expound Isaiah 53 to the eunuch as those who first heard it in the sixth century before Christ. Philip, filled with the Spirit, expounded Isaiah 53 at “grassroots level.

The verses (6-8) that the eunuch read, referred to the suffering servant of the Lord, who, although innocent, bore his suffering without complaint and was therefore exalted by God. In this narrative, as in the rest of Luke and the Acts, there was the pre-supposition that the Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled in the retold experiences and activities of Christ and the early Christianity. Therefore it was not considered strange that Philip referred to Christ when asked by the eunuch who the prophet was talking about. Christ is *par excellence* the servant who brings salvation to the world (this also reminds one of Philippians 2:5-11). It is not far-fetched to interpret Isaiah 53 as the fulfilling of the Messianic promise. The calling of the servant belongs in the first instance to the people of God, but they could not succeed to do justice to this calling. Secondly, the prophet is called as a servant. The prophet, however, realizes his shortcomings exceeds his calling; another servant was therefore necessary. The gospel of Jesus begins in Isaiah 53, but Jesus the Servant was more than Isaiah 53.

And the outsider was invited to come in!

The eunuch made the good news of Jesus Christ his own and made a confession of faith by asking if there was any hindrance in the way of him becoming baptized. His need, as a previously disadvantaged person and outsider, to be taken up in the community of believers, is affirmed by his baptism. The meaning of the good news of acceptance and inclusion is affirmed by the sign of baptism. He became a member of the new humanity (St Paul). With his newly-found faith he could proceed with great joy on his journey in the company of the invisible main character, the Spirit.

Luke's view of the good news to outsiders runs like a golden thread through all his books. Jesus Christ makes a final breakaway from Jewishdom who thought they were the chosen ones. God sets people free. His redemption is spread across all boundaries to all people, irrespective of their ethnic, religious, physical background and sexual orientation.

Murray Janson writes the following about this narrative in a journal: “Were I to colour my relationship with people by skin colour, then my faith would be of the wrong colour”. My friends, our attitude and conduct, especially towards outsiders, reflects Jesus’s attitude of love, compassion, humility and service. You and me are sent to perhaps just bring the good news to people in your own environment; to share the simplicity of the Gospel with those who might cross my path and / or to help people in distress and to make a difference. It is important that we live as liberated and saved people, and that we experience love among each another.

The world is the stage on which God’s redemption is enacted. This is where we find people hurt and seeking after truth on quiet roads and in the big cities where they disappear in loneliness among the masses. It is in the darkness where the light is needed most. It is in God’s world where the boundaries of race, class and sexual orientation do not apply any more and where we find Jesus mixing with strange characters.

14. The captain helps Peter find his way

Acts 10:1-34

Funny how one finds good people at places where you least expect them to be. In Israel there were Roman soldiers who had to maintain law and order among the Jews. They were not loved by the Jews; they served a hostile government. The soldiers were probably extremely frustrated and took it out the the Jewish citizenry. Cornelius, a captain in one of the army units, was however, different from them. He had a good relationship with the Jews. He and his family were dedicated to the Jewish religion and feared God. He was weathy, but generous. He helped the poor. He was, as one would expect, respected by the Jews.

Two visions

One afternoon, as he was praying, Cornelius saw a heavenly face. It was an angel, a heavenly messenger. Cornelius stared at the vision and became scared. I would probably have run away. Cornelius, however, scraped up courage and asked the messenger why he had appeared to him. The angel told him that his prayers and his good deeds towards the poor were noticed by God. For this reason he had to go and fetch Peter, who was a guest at the house of Simon the tanner in Joppa.

A day after Cornelius’s heavenly visitation, Peter also saw a vision while on the roof of Simon’s house. He went there to pray. He became hungry and went into a trance. He saw a sheet descending down from heaven, filled with animals and birds. Three times a heavenly voice commanded Peter to eat these animals. It was probably not coincidental that he became hungry. If I am hungry when I buy groceries, than I tend to buy more, because I feel a greater need. One would have expected that Peter would start eating immediately. He refused, however. According to Jewish practices, he was not allowed to eat unclean animals. Probably not all the animals in the sheet were impure, but Peter would not eat food that was mixed with unclean food. His refusal to eat the unclean food is addressed by the voice. “What God has made clean, should not be regarded as unclean by you!” verse 15). God Himself has lifted the restriction;

the boundary between clean and unclean do not exist anymore. The gospel liberates us.

The boundaries between people must be crossed.

This is more than just the lifting of restrictions on the eating of unclean foods. Peter had a bigger problem. He was, actually, something of a racist. He is brought face to face with his own racial prejudices. All man-made boundaries between the Jews, who regarded themselves as undefiled and the non-Jews as impure, is taken away by the gospel. God has no time for racism. Peter found this difficult to accept. He still has to be liberated from this. “He could not believe that the heathen (non-Jews) could also become Christians”, writes Murray Janson.

As Peter was still wondering about the vision he had seen, the Spirit informed him of the the men of Cornelius that were sent to come and fetch him. He had to accompany them to Cornelius. He then did something out of the ordinary; he allowed the three non-Jews to spend the night at his house. I think he still felt that he was in control, seeing that it was under his roof, on his “territory”, so to speak.

The next day the three of them – Peter and the other two fellow believers – set out on their journey to Cornelius’s house in Cesarea. Cornelius and his people were ready to receive them. Peter entered the non-Jewish house and all resistance and prejudices within him, crumbled (David Bosch). Peter first had to be grinded to the dust, like a small stone, in order to live up to his name, which meant “rock”.

Peter who had walked with Jesus – and had been one of the first who recognized Jesus as the Messiah – still did not recognize that the life of Jesus and His ministry allowed room for everyone. He who on the day of Pentecost received the Spirit as a gift, had still not come to accept the new generation of people to whom he belonged. Only then, after everything that happened to him during the preceding days, could he cry out: “Truly, it is only now that I realize that God does not favour some people above others” (verse 34).

Christ has broken down the walls dividing us from others, such as the colour of our skins, the languages that we speak, our backgrounds, the work that we do or do not have, our gender, etc (Ephesians 2:13-22).

Do we really understand and do we fully accept that our faith in Christ is the only condition for us to be part of His congregation?

15. A western (European) businesswoman opens her heart to Jesus – Acts 16:

Acts 16 11-15; 40

An important woman

Lydia makes me think about the woman in Proverbs. Yes, you are right, it is the smart woman who is worth more than gemstones. She is not just a good housewife, but is also a good businesswoman (Proverbs 31). Lydia was a well-known

businesswoman. She made purple wool material and sold it. The coloured wool material was much sought after and expensive in Philippi. She was probably very rich and well-known. If she were to have a trademark with her material today, it would have been in the class of Carducci, Jeep or Nike. A seller of the exclusive purple material was somebody who would have been associated with prosperity, a comfortable lifestyle and the design of the clothes of many important people. Only monarchs and very rich people could afford the purple clothing.

It was not common for woman to have her own house, and on top of that it was very spacious. On European soil it may not have been very strange. Lydia was the head of her household. No husband or father was in the picture here. She was also very religious. No, she wasn't Jewish, but celebrated the Jewish Sabbath with other women.

Lydia is converted

Luke reports in this section on the missionary journey of Paul and his companions – Silas, Timothy. They ended up, unplanned, but guided by the Holy Spirit, in Europe, more specifically in Philippi, an important city in Macedonia. (Today it is found in Northern Greece). On the day of the Sabbath, they visited a Jewish place of prayer. It was Paul's custom to always start his missionary work by first visiting a synagogue. There was not a synagogue in Philippi, probably because there were very few Jewish men to have a synagogue. A Jewish place of prayer had to substitute for this. At the place of prayer they found a group of women. They started conversing with the women. One of the women who listened to Paul's words was Lydia. She loved God and tried very hard to follow the Jewish religious practices. The Lord opened her heart so that she could respond to Paul's message. She believed in the Jesus that Paul was preaching to her. She became converted.

Lydia was the first convert in Europe. She and her entire household were baptized. Everyone that was part of the household, such as the workers and the extended family, in those years adopted the same faith as that of the head of the house. Paul regularly used to start his missionary work at heads of the households. He knew that if the head becomes converted, the rest of the household would follow suit.

Like the eunuch from Africa, Lydia was a wealthy and influential person, but was also taken up as a religious outsider into the new community of believers through baptism. The meaning of the good news of acceptance and inclusion is affirmed by the sign of baptism. She and her entire household, became members of the "one new humanity", as Paul described this collective faith in Jesus as saviour.

An she shows them hospitality

Lydia demonstrates her newly-found faith through gratitude by inviting Paul and his companions to stay at her place. Hospitality is a Christian virtue.

Hereafter we read in Acts 16 how Paul and Silas landed in jail because they freed a young fortune teller from her burden, which meant that her bosses could not make any more money out of her. We read about the nameless prison warder who also became converted and was baptized.

After being released from prison Paul and his companions once again stayed at Lydia's house (verse 40) and not at the house of the warder. One would have thought that they would rather have gone and stayed at the house of this man. But they did not; the church in Europe owed its foundation to the receptive heart and hospitality of a woman. Lydia conducted a house church. She immediately took the lead in the church. Her house became the centre from where the good news was spread further afield.

The church is really for ordinary people!

In the synagogue women are discriminated against; not so in the church of Christ. Philippi did not have a synagogue because there were not enough men. The requirement was that there should be at least ten men before a synagogue service could commence. Men and women were co-workers in the early church.

In the concluding part of his letter to the Romans (Romans 16), Paul sends greetings to 26 people whom he called by name. Of these, eight were women. Like Jesus, Paul worked closely with women. Paul assigned the same functions to women as to his male co-workers – those of deacons, evangelists and apostles. The list of names do not just tell us something about the important role of women in the first congregations, but also about the mutual connectedness to each other among the different nationalities and cultures. Women and men, the poor and the rich, ordinary people like you and me together share in the rich history of the church of Christ. The acts of the church are also being continued in our own congregation here at the southern tip of Africa.

If we look back to Jesus's ministry and the Acts of the Holy Spirit in the early church, one is amazed at the stories of various people who were touched by the gospel and who started living a new life. We are living in a new age, with many challenges and experiences, but we are members of a loving community of ordinary people, who look at other people with the eyes of Jesus and who minister the good news to them.
