

## Easter II – 19 April 2020

### Theology of place

*God mission, you raised Jesus Christ as the first born of the dead: by your Holy Spirit, empower us to witness to him so that those who have not yet seen may come to believe in him who was and is and is to come, and who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen*

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Ps 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Are we in need of a new kind of Christianity in a new world? With the changing social landscape, what is the impending theological question of our times? Is it a question of evil, the end-times, or of better eco-spirituality? It may be a combination of these. Ultimately, it may be a theology of place.

The world's population is in lockdown. Everybody is finding himself or herself in a form of insolation. The mantra is 'stay home,' because that will offer salvation to the world. St George's finds itself in the heart of Johannesburg, the city with the highest concentration of Covid-19 cases in South Africa. What is the Gospel, the Good News to this city?

In Acts 2:14 and 22; the Apostle Peter addressed the crowd that gathered for the spectacle of Pentecost with "Jerusalem... hear my words." His address was to a multi-ethnic group of people as in any cosmopolitan area. His message identifies the power holders of the social landscape.

In SA and the Global South, there is a decline of the autonomy of the nation state. As economies retract, there is a growing dependency on international rating agencies, and loans from the BRICS bank or IMF. Tensions between constitutionalists and securocrats, between the health sector and the markets are revealed.

In this vacuum of uncertainty, there is a transnational unifying social force, namely the church, which of course has in many instances its own social ideology, typically marked as fundamental in the Global South. Yet, it may or may not be a contributing reason in the context of the place where there is an outcry for liberation. Liberation from the class struggles and being trapped in slums.

It is characteristic of urbanization, yet there is also equalizing means through digital media where virtual identities are created. Digitization establishes a communion of communities, but in fact also enhances the urbanization of the entire world.

The church could well use this to fulfil the mission of God – the sending of the Word. The incarnate Logos is transversal – it cuts across social orders. The Word

is polysemic: it has multiple meanings that could be ascribed to it depending on the narrative of a particular community.

The properties of the Word could be perceived either univocally or analogically. I.e. are the virtues ascribed to God equal to those within humans, or are they similar, but actually just an analogy of God's goodness, because we can never really attain the transcendence of God's substance? Is there ever equality in an ever-differentiating process of defining?

How do we then formulate our message, indeed our linguistics that should contain the meaning of freedom? Is our message of freedom and prophetic ideals relative or absolute? There are three components to consider: a) Liberty, b) dialogue, and c) enculturation. A – b: activism, b – c: cultural elitism, c – a: escapism.

In order to achieve the right formula, we need to be a diaconal church – a serving church, in contrast to an imperialistic church. That will emulate David's words when he says that he "dwells in hope... that his inheritance has fallen on beautiful places." St Peter further states, "It is an inheritance that is unfading, undefiled, and imperishable."

This dwelling is a place of interiority. The church should become a contemplative community, empowered by the Holy Spirit in an upper room so that as we enter the public square it speaks to the aspirations of humans. It is not a populist discourse, but of selflessness.

The question of place is one of centrality, understanding that pain is not common to all. Yet there is a common virtue of hope and the desire for healing in the world. The Gospel of the Word, Jesus Christ, helps to define and outline a theology of place and in creating a transcendental sacred space wherein there are both liberty and the vantage point of seeing the larger scene, so that we can make room for others. Jesus says that he is going to prepare a place for us, because in his Father's house there are many rooms. We have a place in him. Amen.