



THE UNITING
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
IN SOUTHERN
AFRICA

Friday, 12 June 2020

Dear Friends

We live in strange times, indeed. In the normal course of events, this would be my final letter to you as Moderator of the General Assembly, a letter in which I would have nostalgically looked back over my term, highlighted some areas, indicated some concerns and returned to pastor the congregation that has so patiently put up with my absences and distractions over the previous two years. As if we needed reminding, this is no ordinary year and we find ourselves having to meet challenges we never thought we would have to deal with in our time. Church buildings shut down, but church services continuing online; community feeding schemes up and running; help being offered to the most vulnerable in our societies; the economy taking a hammering and many people struggling to make ends meet. It became apparent that we would not be able to hold the General Assembly this year as planned. There was some discussion about what we should do. Essentially there were two options, since we do not have powers for delaying the holding of an Assembly. One option was a Special Executive Commission and the other was an emergency Meeting of the General Assembly. For various reasons, we decided to go with the latter option and so, as provided for by the Manual, after consultation with the Clerk, I called an Emergency Meeting of the General Assembly. This meeting took place on Wednesday 10th June 2020, where about 75 Commissioners attended via Zoom. We agreed that the 2020 General Assembly should be postponed (not cancelled) until June/July 2021, to take place in the bounds of the Presbytery of Drakensberg. This means that my term will continue for another year and that Sipho (Moderator Designate) will be inducted at that Assembly in 2021. The Assembly cannot direct Presbyteries as to what they can and cannot do, but the Assembly did appeal to Presbyteries to keep their office bearers in office until after the Assembly next year. Similarly, Committees of the Assembly will continue with their current personnel until the Assembly sits next year. We are planning to hold a meeting of the Presbytery Office Bearers and Committee convenors in November this year, provided we are able to do so, at which time we will discuss the way forward for the Church post-COVID.

At that meeting, I shared a devotion based on the passage of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. As I read this parable, in preparation for this devotion, and the context in which Jesus spoke it, I found myself wondering, in line with my theme of "Living Your Legacy", how I might act if I knew I had only a week or so left: What would I want to leave with the elders, leaders and others in this congregation that I would like them to focus on when I had left them to get on with the task alone? This final parable in Matthew's Gospel brings the following into focus: How will we be judged for the things that we have done while on the earth? What actions are the most meaningful for those of us who claim allegiance to Jesus Christ?

This is one of the most vivid parables Jesus ever spoke. We must never forget that Jesus spoke these words with his death very clearly in his focus and the lesson is crystal clear—that God will judge us in accordance with our reaction to human need. In this COVID-19 world, there is desperate need for food, money, work, companionship, love, but we, as

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Christ's church, are so limited in the help we can provide.

Faced with this challenge, I would like to say three things. First, **meaningful help is simple.** Help that is meaningful and counts in God's sight must be help in simple things. The things which Jesus picks out: giving a hungry person a meal, or a thirsty person a drink, welcoming a stranger, cheering the sick, visiting the prisoner—are things which anyone can do. It is not a question of giving away thousands of Rands, or of writing our names in the annals of history; it is a case of giving simple help to the people we meet every day. There never was a parable which so opened the way to glory for ordinary people doing the simplest things. Second, **meaningful help must be sincere.** If our help is to mean anything, it must be help which is uncalculating. Those who helped did not think that they were helping Christ and thus piling up brownie points in heaven; they helped because they could not stop themselves. It was the natural, instinctive, quite uncalculating reaction of the loving heart. Whereas, on the other hand, the attitude of those who failed to help was; 'If we had known it was *you* we would gladly have helped; but we thought it was only some commoner who was not worth helping.' It is still true that there are those who will help if they are given praise and thanks and publicity; but to help like that is not to help, it is to pander to self-esteem. Such help is not generosity; it is disguised selfishness. The help which wins the approval of God is that which is given for nothing but the sake of helping. Third, **meaningful help is given to Jesus himself.** Jesus confronts us with the wonderful truth that all such help given is given to himself, and all such help withheld is withheld from himself. How can that be? If we really wish to delight a parent's heart, if we really wish to move him to gratitude the best way to do it is to help his child. God is the great Father; and the way to delight the heart of God is to help God's children, other men, and women.

There were two men who found this parable blessedly true. The one was Francis of Assisi; he was wealthy and high-born and high-spirited. But he was not happy. He felt that life was incomplete. Then one day he was out riding and met a leper, loathsome and repulsive in the ugliness of his disease. Something moved Francis to dismount and fling his arms around this wretched sufferer; and in his arms the face of the leper changed to the face of Christ. The other was Martin of Tours. He was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped him and asked for alms. Martin had no money; but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold and Martin gave what he had. He took off his soldier's coat, worn and frayed as it was; he cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar man. That night he had a dream. In it he saw the heavenly places and all the angels and Jesus in the midst of them; and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. One of the angels said to him, "Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?" And Jesus answered softly, "My servant Martin gave it to me."

So, the next time you hand out a food parcel, give a cup of soup, share a slice of bread, offer a drink of water, speak to a person on the telephone, smile at someone from behind a mask or do any other very simple thing that helps another, think of how you might do that knowing that you were doing it to, and for, Jesus himself.

Please stay home, stay healthy and stay safe.

Regards.



Peter

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