

# **The Cathedral of the Holy Nativity**

## **Lent 2012**

### **A series of Bible studies**

### **“Here am I Lord, send me”**

This series of Bible studies picks up on and develops the theme of Bishop Rubin’s “Charge to the 117<sup>th</sup> Session of the Synod of the Diocese of Natal” on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 2011. In that charge, Bishop Rubin reflects on the prophet Isaiah’s willingness to hear and accept God’s commission to be sent to the people of God (Isaiah 6:8). How does God’s call and Isaiah’s response relate to our context, asks Bishop Rubin?

The starting point, says Bishop Rubin, of appropriating this scripture to our contexts is to recognise that “it all began with an encounter with God”. And, continues Bishop Rubin, “that ... must be our starting point”. Furthermore, what we learn from Isaiah’s encounter with God, argues Bishop Rubin, is that this encounter propels Isaiah to witness and service. So our encounter with God should do the same.

Lent is a wonderful opportunity to deepen our encounter with God and to offer ourselves afresh to God’s call. “Here am I; send me!” This series of Bible studies explores what it means to make ourselves available to God for witness and service in our own contexts, so that we can answer in the affirmative the question posed to us by Bishop Rubin at the end of his charge: “Dear friends, are we like Isaiah also willing to make ourselves available to God in order to be agents of the transforming love of Jesus in the world?”

## Bible Study 1

### “But the midwives feared God”

#### Exodus 1:8-22

**Exodus 1:7-22** <sup>8</sup> Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup> He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. <sup>10</sup> Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." <sup>11</sup> Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. <sup>12</sup> But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. <sup>13</sup> The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, <sup>14</sup> and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. <sup>15</sup> The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup> "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." <sup>17</sup> But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup> So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" <sup>19</sup> The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." <sup>20</sup> So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. <sup>21</sup> And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. <sup>22</sup> Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

1. With your eyes closed, listen to the reading of Exodus 1:8-22. Now re-read this passage of scripture in your own translation. What is the most significant phrase or image from the text for you? Share this phrase or image with your neighbour, explaining why you think this phrase or image is so important.

*In small groups discuss the next three questions:*

2. The theme for our Lent Bible studies is “Here am I Lord, send me”. In the text from Exodus we find two women being sent. Who is sending them and what are they being sent to do?

3. Why do Shiphrah and Puah refuse to obey the command of the king of Egypt?

4. What do you think it means when the text says, “the midwives feared God”? What does it mean “to fear God”?

*After some feedback from each small group, discuss in your small groups the next two questions, one which focuses on the text and one which focuses on our contexts:*

5. It is clear from this text that “to fear God” leads to certain kinds of actions and not others. What kinds of actions does “fearing God” lead to?

6. This biblical text seems to compare two different forms of being sent. Shiphrah and Puah are sent by their king, but they are also sent by God. One form of being sent leads to death and the other leads to life. What does it mean in our contexts to be sent by God to bring life? In what ways can God use us to bring life to those around us?

*After some feedback from each small group, discuss in your small groups the next question.*

7. What are the obstacles that make it difficult for us to do God's work?

*The Bible study is brought to a close in prayer:*

8. The story of Shiphrah and Puah makes it clear that it is not always easy to do God's work. Let us pray that God will protect us, just as he protected Shiphrah and Puah, as we make ourselves available to God for witness and service. Let us pray, ....

### **Tasks**

1. Let us do at least one thing that 'brings life' this next week that we would not normally do as a form of witness and service.
2. Read Exodus 3:1-4:17 in preparation for next week.

## **Bible Study 2**

### **“I will send you to Pharaoh”**

#### **Exodus 3:1-4:17**

1. Listen again to this familiar story being read (if possible dramatically). As you listen, count the number of times Moses says, ‘But’.

2. Having listened carefully to the story, share with your neighbour those parts of the story that you remember, and then share those parts of the story that you do not remember well?

*In small groups discuss the next three questions:*

3. What is the witness and service that God calls Moses to do? What does this have in common with the witness and service of Shiphrah and Puah?

4. This story begins, like the story of Isaiah, with an encounter with God. And like the story of Siphrah and Puah, the key to this story is the fear of God. However, what makes this story different is that neither the encounter with God nor Moses’ fear of God is enough for Moses to respond to God’s call: “I will send you to Pharaoh”. Moses sees many obstacles and has many anxieties! What are Moses’ concerns? How many ‘buts’ does he have? There are at least five ‘buts’ (3:11 and 13; 4:1, 10, and 13)!

5. How does God respond to each of Moses’ ‘buts’?

*After some feedback from each small group, find a place where you can reflect on our own. As a liturgical act, take off your shoes, placing yourself on holy ground with God as you reflect on the next two questions:*

6. What kinds of obstacles do you see and what kinds of concerns do you have that make it difficult for you to bear witness to God and be of service to God?

7. God provides Moses with a range of resources to do the task that God wants him to do. What kinds of resources do you need from God to do the work that God has called you to do?

*The Bible study is brought to close in prayer:*

8. Let us pray that God will equip us with the resources that we need to bear witness and be of service to God. Let us pray ....

#### **Tasks**

1. Use the week to deepen your reflection on questions 6 and 7.
2. Read Luke 4:16-21 in preparation for next week.

## **Bible Study 3**

### **“The Spirit of the Lord ... has sent me”**

#### **Luke 4:16-21**

1. Listen to this text from scripture. Re-read this text in your own favourite translation. Reflect for a moment by yourself on what this familiar text has meant in your life?
2. What does this text have in common with the two biblical texts we have already studied in this series? Share this with your neighbour.

*In small groups discuss the next three questions:*

3. Jesus says that “the Spirit of the Lord” has anointed him to do five things. What are these five things?
4. Who are the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the bruised/broken/oppressed in the time of Jesus?
5. Can you find an example of each of these from Luke and Acts? Luke uses this ‘manifesto’ as a way of structuring his gospel and the companion volume, Acts.

*After some feedback from each small group, listen to the following short input:*

Luke is quoting from Isaiah 61, which is in turn alluding to Leviticus 25, which is all about “the year of the Lord’s favour”. Both Isaiah and Jesus are referring to the ‘year of jubilee’. Leviticus 25 is a legal text that provides legal protection for the marginalised. Leviticus 25 offers legal protection to the land (25:2-12), and to those who have lost their land (25:13-16, 25-43). While Leviticus 25 offers protection to Israelites who have become enslaved through debt to other Israelites, it does not offer the same protection to foreign, non-Israelite slaves (25:44-46). But Jesus, according to Luke, extends the year of jubilee, the time of liberation, to all, including the Gentiles.

*In small groups discuss the next two questions:*

6. Who are the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the bruised/broken/oppressed in our contexts?
7. The jubilee was a form of legal protection for the vulnerable. What forms of protection are there for the marginalised in our society, and what role can we play, as disciples of Jesus and as the church, in bringing the advent of jubilee to all?

*The Bible study is brought to close in prayer:*

8. Let us pray that God will enable us to recognise the marginalised around us and to work with others in our society to bring about “the year of the Lord’s favour”. Let us pray ....

**Tasks:**

1. Let us reflect this week on the individual and the structural dimensions of marginalisation in our society.
2. Read Romans 12:1-15:13; and 1 Corinthians 12:1-14:40.

## **Bible Study 4**

### **“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice”**

#### **Romans 12:1-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-7**

1. Listen to these two texts. Summarise in one sentence what Paul is trying to communicate to these two churches. Share this with your neighbour.

*In small groups discuss the following question:*

2. What do you think Paul means by when he says to each of the Christians in Rome “not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (verse 3)? Re-read this verse in as many translations as you have in the group.

*After some feedback from the small groups, discuss the following two questions:*

3. Paul then goes on to shift his focus from the individual Christian (verse 3 is in the singular) to the church as a community of believers (verse 4 is in the plural). Why does Paul begin with the individual and then shift to the community?

4. What is Paul’s argument in verses 4-8?

*After some feedback from the small groups, re-read 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 in your group in as many translations as you have. Then discuss the following questions:*

5. Paul seems to be making a similar argument here to the Corinthian church as he was to the Roman church. What are the key points of his argument:

5.1 in verses 4-6,

5.2 and then in verse 7?

6. Summarise the main points of Paul’s teaching to these two churches, identifying the emphasis of each.

*After some feedback from the small groups, spend some time on your own reflecting of what Paul is saying to you:*

7. Re-read the larger portion of Paul’s letters from which these two extracts come, Romans 12:1-15:13 and 1 Corinthians 12:1-14:40. Which of Paul’s points are most relevant to you? What is the one thing you will take away from this Bible study?

*The Bible study is brought to close in prayer:*

8. Let us pray that God will enable us to recognise what gifts the Spirit has given to us and to have the wisdom to know how to use these gifts “for the common good”. Let us pray ....

**Tasks**

1. Use the week to deepen your reflection on question 7, and commit yourself to affirming the gifts of someone you know, telling them how much you appreciate their 'gift'.
2. Read Genesis 1:26-31.

## **Bible Study 5**

### **“God blessed them, and God said ...”**

#### **Genesis 1:24-31**

1. Listen to this text being read aloud. Canonically, this is the first ‘sending’ of humankind. What picture comes to your mind as you listen to this text? Share this with your neighbour.

*After some feedback, discuss the following question:*

2. What words are used in verses 26 and 28 to describe the relationship between humans and the environment, and what kind of relationship do they seem to imply? Compare how different translations translate these verses.

*After some feedback from each small group, listen to the following short input, and then discuss the question that follows:*

In the Hebrew language the word usually translated as ‘to rule’ (‘radah’ in Hebrew) and the word usually translated as ‘to subdue’ or ‘to have dominion over’ (‘kabash’ in Hebrew) can have a very harsh meaning. Biblical scholars have reflected on these words (‘radah’ and ‘kabash’), wondering whether they can be understood in a different way. Some biblical scholars have argued that the words need not be understood here in their normal harsh sense. They suggest that because these words are associated with creatures (humans) who are made in the image of God, who is revealed here as creating and caring, these words might be understood to convey the notion of ‘to shepherd’ (‘radah’) and ‘to take possession of/to stand within’ (‘kabash’). The basic idea of this interpretation is that human beings are God’s representatives on earth, being located within the environment (‘standing within it’) and caring for it (‘shepherding it’).

Other biblical scholars point to a similar word in verse 16, ‘mashal’ (‘to rule’). Here it is clear that the idea of ‘ruling’ or ‘governing’, repeated three times, is not meant in a harsh way. The sun and the moon are created “to give light on the earth”. They are made to do good to the earth and not damage (see verses 14-18). The basic idea of this interpretation is that human beings are ‘to rule’ in the same way as the sun and the moon ‘rule’.

Other scholars place this narrative in its ancient historical setting. They argue that the ancient Hebrews who wrote Genesis 1 were responding to ancient Babylonian creation stories. In the Babylonian stories of creation ‘the sun’ (‘shamash’) and ‘the moon’ (‘yareah’) were gods! So these biblical scholars suggest that Genesis 1 might be responding to and critiquing the Babylonian understanding. In Genesis 1 “the greater light” (‘the sun’) and “the lesser light” (‘the moon’) (verse 15) are clearly “made” (verse 16) by God, and they are certainly not gods. The main point of verses 26 and 28 according to these scholars is that it is humans who are

‘in control’ of the earth, under God, and not the Babylonian gods! The basic idea of this interpretation is that humans are the primary agents on earth (under God).

Another dimension of the ancient context of this text is the harshness of the life for the majority, most of whom were subsistence farmers struggling to survive in the dry and rocky hill country of Israel-Palestine. Most had little access to even the limited technology of the plough, so life had to be ‘struggled for’ amidst the harsh landscape. From this perspective the text is a call to persist in this struggle and to make a place for humankind.

3. How does this information help you to understand the relationship between humans and the environment in Genesis 1:24-31?

*After some feedback from the small groups, discuss the following two questions:*

4. What are the most common understandings of the relationship between humans and the environment in your local parish and community? In what ways are these common understandings helpful or harmful?

5. How do we balance theologically the needs of our people in our South African ‘developmental state’ with our responsibilities to and our stewardship of our endangered ecosystems?

*The Bible study is brought to close in prayer in the following way:*

6. Write a prayer (on your own or with a partner) that expresses what this Bible study has ‘said’ to you about how God has sent us to engage with the environment. Share these prayers in a time of prayer together.

**Tasks:**

1. What other practical things could we do to respond to this Bible study so that we are ‘sent’ to engage responsibly with our environment? What other biblical texts are important for our understanding of how God has sent us into creation?

2. Read Mark 11:27-13:2 in preparation for next Wednesday in Holy Week.

## **Bible Study 6**

### **“So he sent his beloved son”**

#### **Mark 12:1-12**

1. Listen to this parable Jesus is telling. What is the parable about? Share this with your neighbour.

*After some feedback, discuss the following question:*

2. Who is Jesus addressing directly when he tells this parable?

*After some feedback, listen to the following short input, and then discuss the question that follows:*

This parable is the part of a series of contestations within the Jerusalem temple between Jesus and the temple leadership. Mark’s gospel has been building to this point since chapter 7 when Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem confront Jesus in his home area of Galilee. They seem to have been watching him. Now Jesus has come to their territory, and has been welcomed by “many people” (11:8). As soon as he enters the temple (11:27) “the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders” challenge him. It is them that Jesus is addressing when he tells this parable. But from verse 12 it is clear that others are listening too, for though the temple leadership want to arrest him, “they feared the crowd”.

To understand this confrontation between Jesus and the temple leadership it is important to reflect briefly on the role of the Jerusalem temple. The Jerusalem temple, like other temples in the ancient world, had a strong economic, as well as a religious, function. The temple was the primary economic institution in Judea, co-ordinating the tribute paid by peasant cultivators and shepherds, controlling the temple tax required of every Jew, and managing the revenues from the temple’s land-holdings and the profits from the sale of sacrificial animals and money exchange. This wealth was controlled and administered by the temple elite, whom we meet in series of confrontations from Mark 11:27 to 12:37.

It is no wonder then that Jesus does not linger in the temple on his first entry (11:11), staying only long enough to confirm how it is being used. It is also not surprising that, on his second entry (11:15), he drove out those who were buying and selling and that he declared that the temple leadership had made the temple “a den of robbers” (11:17).

On his third entry into the temple (11:27) he is confronted by the temple leadership, and so begins a long account of a series of confrontations between Jesus and various sectors of the temple leadership, culminating in 13:2 where Jesus prophesies the destruction of the temple.

3. Taking this historical and social background into account, what is the main point of the parable Jesus tells in 12:1-12?

*After some feedback, listen to the following short input, and then discuss the question that follows:*

On his way to the temple from Bethany (12:13) Jesus uses the image of the fig tree to teach his disciples that God expects the temple to bear fruit in season and out of season. The cursing of the fig tree symbolises the condemnation of the temple, which robs those it should be serving (11:17), including the poor widow whom we meet later (12:40, 41-42). In our parable Jesus uses a similar image, the image of a vineyard.

4. From the parable in 12:1-12, what does Jesus (and God) expect from the vineyard/temple?

*After some feedback from the small groups, discuss the following two questions:*

5. If the church is the inheritor of God's vineyard (12:9), what does this parable say to us, by way of warning and about our task as those sent by God?

6. Summarise what you have learned from this series of Bible studies. What does it mean "to be sent" by the Lord?

**Tasks:**

1. Go back over this series of Bible studies and reflect more fully on Question 6.

## **Some reflections on the methodology used in these Bible studies**

These Bible studies are based on the methodology developed by the Ujamaa Centre over the past twenty-three years.

### **Step 1**

Each Bible study begins with the hearing of the word of God, and a question that invites participation and engagement with the biblical text.

### **Step 2**

The Bible study then ‘slows down’, as we engage more deeply with the detail of our biblical text, allowing its voice to be heard. Step 1 allows for ‘an immediate’ engagement with the biblical text. Step 2 allows for time to delve more deeply into the detail.

### **Step 3**

Having ‘re-read’ the biblical text carefully and slowly, we are now ready to once again appropriate what God is saying to us from this text. Step 2 calls us to be respectful of the ‘voice’ of the biblical text. Step 3 calls us to be responsible to God’s voice speaking to us through the biblical text. Step 2 calls for reflection. Step 3 calls for action.

Gerald West

Lent 2012