

*Can you drink the cup?*

All Saints Sunday, 3 November 2019

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 12:1-3

Preacher: Robert Steiner

“Can you drink the cup”, Jesus asked his disciples? “Do you know what you are asking for”, when you commit yourself to following me? On All Saints Sunday we remember the cloud of witnesses who probably also did not know what they were asking for, but were willing to drink the cup and live by faith. They were able, with the words of Hebrews, to fix their eyes on Jesus, their pioneer of faith, resist the entanglements of sin and trust that God’s justice and mercy will prevail. To live by faith is different from living by power, by greed, by deception, by indifference and compromise. And to remember those who lived by faith is to evoke a dangerous memory: It positions us squarely against those who have no qualms about living life at the expanses of other lives. Such defiance and resistance often involves concrete suffering and a willingness to surrender toxic attachments. The list of “saints” in Hebrews 11 offers a panopticon of curious characters, of women and men with clay feet, each working out for their own times what it means to live by faith and not by seeing. None of them expected to be included in such a roll of honour. And many more could have been included, unsung heroes of lives that would not conform to society’s norms. Such a list needs constant attention and care. Every faith community would be able to come up with their own list of people who inspired them to live by faith.

“Can you drink the cup?”

This morning we have been presented with a chalice that has travelled a long way and preserves a dangerous memory. We have passed it around during the celebration of Communion and everyone had a chance to hold it for a moment. It was such a powerful reminder that Jesus’s question continues to call each generation anew into responsibility. Occasionally, the “sacred thread” (Christine Valters Paintner) that connects us across different times and worlds can become very immediate and tangible. Pam Robertson, the daughter of Gert and Rob Robertson, has entrusted the cup into our care. It was passed around in the first non-racial Presbyterian congregation in South Africa, started by Gert and Rob during the dark times of Apartheid. Drinking together from the same cup at St Anthony’s United

Church expressed a commitment to non-violent resistance against a regime that classified people according to the colour of their skin. (The details have been captured by Rob in a book on St Anthony's activists and can be downloaded here:

[http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv\\_pdf/A2558/A2558-5-3-3-text.pdf](http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdf/A2558/A2558-5-3-3-text.pdf)

But the cup's history takes us even further back, to the Presbyterian Church at Brownsville in the West of Jamaica. The congregation was composed of black peasant farmers, whose ancestors had been brought as slaves from West Africa to work in the sugar plantations. When slavery was abolished in Jamaica in 1838 they settled down as free small-holders. Among them were descendants of Africans set free from a slave ship which arrived in the West Indian waters after the abolition of slavery. Can we drink the cup? Do we know what we are asking for? Those questions radiated among us with an unexpected urgency and beauty. The cup was passed around in a circle - not without trembling.

"Can you drink the cup?"

To drink the cup is to recall the unsettling memory of slavery and racism. It is to be sensitized to new forms of slavery, division and exploitation. We are invited to think of ourselves as guardians of human freedom and dignity. We are encouraged to witness both the pain of those humiliated and the hopes of those living by hope for the fulfilment of God's Shalom. Such engagement is nourished by a culture of remembering, of not forgetting, of re-calling and re-telling. It is a counter-cultural practice in as far as our dominating consumer culture tries to erase all memory by preaching the illusion of eternal presence and self-indulgence. Walter Brueggemann compares the atmosphere to the one created in a casino: A vacuum without context, without clocks and calendars. We lose track of time. All that matters is the presence. There is no cloud of witnesses to hold us accountable.

"Can you drink the cup?"

The cup connects us with each other, with all those who have gone before us and with all those who will follow us. This "sacred thread", continuously woven between us, has different dimensions and layers. There are of course the stories we share about our ancestors. There

are the shared rituals of remembrance that are unique to each culture. But more recent research on epigenetic, as Christine Valters Paintner highlights, has also revealed the extent to which we physically carry the wounds and unfulfilled longings of our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents in our genes. This has huge implications for understanding some of our present challenges in South Africa. If trauma is handed on physically, from generation to generation, then the journey of healing, of learning to surrender our attachments, to live a life in freedom, has to involve careful soul searching, at an individual level, but also at a national level. Working through the wounds and unfulfilled longings of our ancestors can help us to understand ourselves better and regain control over our lives. There are seeds sown into the fields of our lives, waiting to grow and blossom.

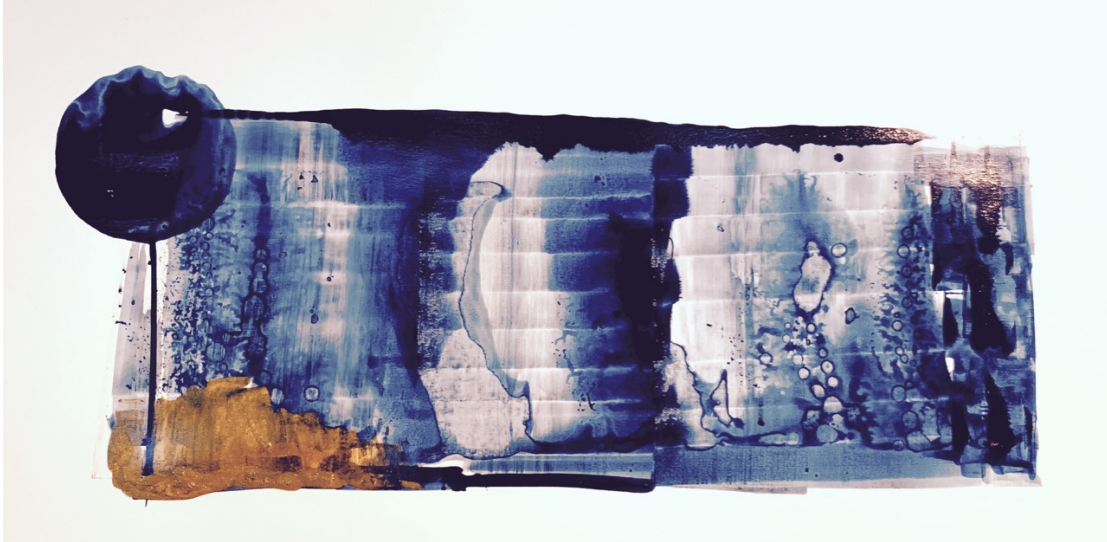
“Can you drink the cup?”

Jesus’ question is an invitation to live by faith and not by seeing, by trust and not by certainties. Unfortunately institutionalized religion has the tendency to cast prophetic visions into stone and to equate living by faith with holding certain dogmas to be true. Orthodoxy becomes more important than orthopraxis. When it comes to religion, the greatest danger is not to know too little, but to know too much, to be too sure and certain about God. Such arrogance only leads to idolatry, the worship of a god created in our own image. Such a god becomes an instrument of manipulation and oppression. Such a god welcomes crusades and promotes the kind of “isms” that cause havoc in our world, rob people of their dignity, and deny our common humanity.

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It was in the night of his betrayal and arrest that Jesus took the cup and gave thanks to God. It was in the night that Jesus evoked the ancient memory of exodus and covenant. It was in the night of great uncertainty that Jesus asked his friends to stay with him. It was in the night that Jesus prayed for the cup to be taken away. It was in the night that he was determined to stay in the place of love at all costs and trusted God’s commitment to life, even in the face of death. “Your will be done” is not an expression of fatalism, but a deep conviction that with God life will always triumph over death. And there is always a cloud of witnesses, present to both our despair and hope.

It was in the night that Carol Cragg responded the call for medical assistance for those refugees who fled from brutal police force and found refuge in the sanctuary of a church.



The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke knew about the ambivalence of the night, its threats of absence and its promises of presence:

*The darkness embraces everything.  
It lets me imagine a great present stirring beside me.  
I believe in the night.*

*-from the Book of Hours*

May God always bless us with such awareness. We are never alone.

Amen.