



World Church Sunday: 28th January 2024

Readings: *Luke 10, 25-37; Acts 16, 6-10*

Epiphany IV

Sharing Together. With Revd. Nigel Uden, after the reading of the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* (Luke 10)

Forty two years ago, I went to South Africa for the first time. It has been suggested that I have never told some of you what I did there, nor why it matters to me. So, on this World Church Sunday, I accept the request to do so.



On the world map, South Africa is the yellow country at the far south of the continent in the middle of the screen, right at the bottom.



And on this second map, which *is* South Africa, I went to a city near to Johannesburg, in Gauteng, then called the Transvaal. It's that smallest yellow province, a little to the right of the centre of the map. That first visit was as a student minister. For nine months, I was assistant to a couple of ministers in congregations from the Congregational and Presbyterian family of churches.



Four years later, and recently married to Bethan, I returned to become the minister of one of those churches. Here you see us arriving at the airport in April 1987, and being welcomed by the young people of the church.



A couple of years later there was another arrival; Jess was born, and the picture shows her when she was about 18 months old



The city to which we went is called Roodepoort, and lies to the southwest of Johannesburg, part of that thriving conurbation that was built upon gold. That is why it is often known as eGoli, the Zulu word for ‘place of gold’



Roodepoort is about a quarter of an hour’s drive from Soweto – the so called South Western Townships – where I also worked. Essentially, Roodepoort is where the white people lived, and Soweto where the black people lived. The laws meant they did not live in the same communities, did not have the same opportunities, and normally, you were far ‘better off’ if you were white than if you were black. This idea was called *apartheid*, which means something like ‘separating’ or ‘setting apart’



I was minister of a Congregational and Presbyterian congregation, called St Barnabas. They were like that saint, encouragers. Here is the outside of the building, in a white area called Florida



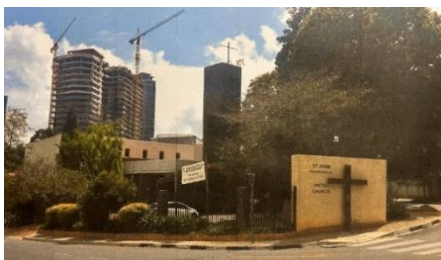
And here is the inside: the worship area. Either side of the cross there is a banner. On the left is a person approaching the cross, weighed down by the burdens of life. On the right, the love of God that Jesus shows on Calvary has the person walking from the cross, standing erect, released from their struggles and sins. That key idea is a big part of African Christianity, and not least at St Barnabas’



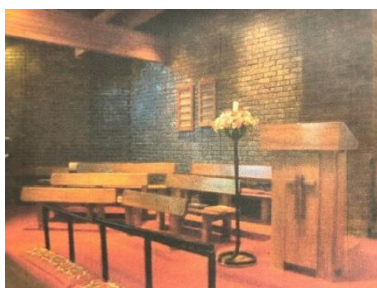
Almost all the time I was in South Africa I was also Interim Moderator of several churches in Soweto, amongst people whose languages included Sesotho, Zulu, Xhosa, Setswana, or Venda. This picture is of the fellowship at one called Percy Webber Memorial in Mofolo North, and another was Soweto United Church, in Orlando East



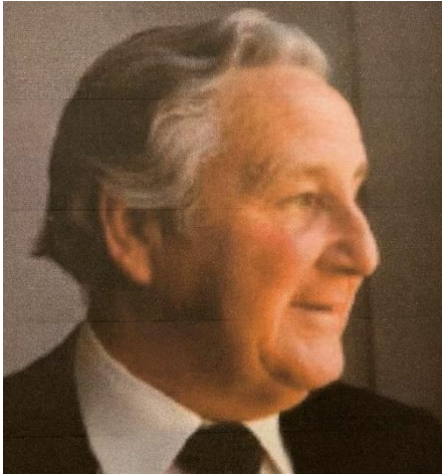
The road between the two included the place where just a decade earlier this school student – Hector Pieteron (1963-76) - was one of several killed in 1976 during protests about how *apartheid* was affecting their education. In Soweto I was never far from the reality of that unavoidably separated life.



For the last eighteen months we were in South Africa, I was one of the ministers of this church, St John's – a four way ecumenical partnership between Anglican, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Christians. It was sometimes called St John's Metho-congreg-presb-ang Church



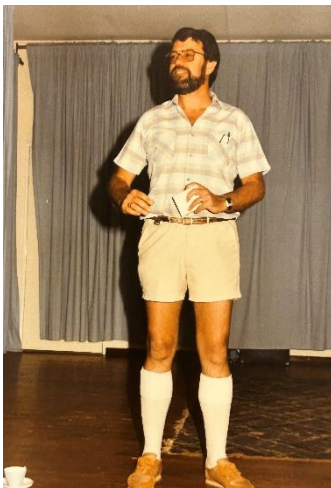
This is the pulpit and choir stalls' South Africa shaped me forever. It reshaped my waist line. It defined my faith, my discipleship and my ministry. Some of that 'shaping' was because of the people I met. Here are four of them.



Joseph Wing was an Englishman who gave the whole of his ordained ministry to the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, for many years as General Secretary. He taught me the essential connection between trusting Jesus' love, and letting that love shape the way one treated other people – especially those who were treated badly by their neighbours or their governments. Along with Gerald Moore, the accompanist, Joe is one of my heroes.



John Thorne was a Congregational minister. and one of my mentors as a student minister. A so-called Coloured person, I learned from him the unenviable position of being neither black nor white. Ever since, I have wanted to respect people for who they are. not for who they are not.



Martin Lund is a son of the Manse and a Presbyterian minister fluent in English, Afrikaans, and Zulu. He, too, was, and remains, a mentor to whom I owe more than I can say. Apart from a theologically intense critique of *apartheid*, he also sealed my awareness of the Holy Spirit as the irresistible expression of 'God in the present tense', the source of living faith and radical loving.



And this is Edith Nkwanyana, a dame formidable of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa. She immersed me in the life of the churches in Soweto, where part of my heart remains, and she it was who gave to Jess the name Tsepiso, meaning 'promise', or 'loving'.

And now, I want to mention four of the countless things by which I was matured, strengthened, and enriched during the seven years that I spent in South Africa.

First, **worship**



Here is a communion service at Percy Webber Church. It was a joy to be at St Barnabas or St John's for the 7.30am and 9.30am services and then to hurtle along the road to Dobsonville, into Soweto, knowing that something so different, but entirely complementary, awaited me



Here is the choir at St John's – as traditional an English choir as you could wish for. Charles Villiers Stanford and John Rutter were as beloved there as they are here!



And here is the *Isililo Manyano Bomme*. Women's groups in South African churches were dedicated, fruitful, and to be respected. *Isililo Manyano Bomme* means something like 'the cry of mothers united'. Their singing and dancing could be exuberant and rhythmic; at other times it was movingly soulful and poignant.



Secondly, worship leading in South Africa almost always involved **preaching** – even if one wasn't the designated preacher for the day, *umfundisi* had to say something. Sometimes there were five services to conduct on a Sunday, and frequently with a translator. One had to remember to prepare half a much material, otherwise the sermon with translation took twice as long ... more, given that most African languages take longer to convey an English phrase.



Thirdly, the churches in South Africa remained committed to **planting new churches**. New areas of housing were forever mushrooming, and it was inconceivable not to have a church at the heart of a settlement. Here is the black township of Alexandra. The Moderator of the Presbytery is turning the sod of a new Presbyterian Church in that settlement for black people who worked in the wealthy suburb of Sandton, but enjoyed few of its material benefits.



The minister is the Revd Ndoda Ambrose Mbuyisa, who died thirty years later in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic of March 2020



And this is the only church in the founding of which I have ever been involved. Strubens Valley was a new estate a few miles from Florida



We established the joint Congregational and Presbyterian Church, which today is called Strubens Valley Family Church



I did not find it possible to be a Christian in South Africa at that time and simply to live with *apartheid*, 'to walk by on the other side', as if *apartheid* pleased God, or blessed God's people. I was immersed in the work of the South African Council Churches as it strove to live out the truth that 'the doctrine of *apartheid* was a heresy and the practice a sin'. This is a picture hanging in my office here at Downing Place Church. It depicts the banner that was in the entrance hall of the SACC on the day in August 1988 it was bombed by those who resented its anti-*apartheid* work. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission later found that P. W. Botha, the State President, had ordered the attack. By contrast, the banner depicts Christ's arms embracing the hurting world, and giving his life for peace, kagiso, khotso, ukolo, vrede



I was amongst those who planned and enabled a World Council of Churches and South African Council of Churches Consultation in Cape Town in October 1991 – *Towards an ecumenical agenda for a changing South Africa*



Still two and half years before the election that installed Nelson Mandela as State President, the conference showed far less about how near we were to that peace and far more how very much there remained to do before the rainbow nation could emerge. And how much there remains to do to this day.



Being caught up in the struggle against *apartheid* was amongst the most profoundly pastoral ministry I have ever exercised. Restoring to people the dignity of equality was what I understood the work and call of Christ to require. And my work took me to the side of those who suffered the worst effects of *apartheid*. Wilton Mkwazi was jailed on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela. His wife, Irene, was a member of the church I served in Soweto. She died in 1988, the year before he was released, and the funeral was a significant moment, at which Desmond Tutu preached. As much as at any other time it mattered to say, 'nothing – not life or death, not rulers, not anything in all creation - shall separate us from the love of God'



Thus I come so frequently to pray,
 Nkosi sikel'i Afrika;
 God bless Africa.
 Please, 'go and do likewise



We shall sing a song that I learned in Johannesburg, as Mrs Nkwanyana led a sort of *ecclesiastical conga* around the General Assembly. Even as the 1994 election approached, there were terribly dark days of assassination, terrorism, and repression. She got the Assembly on its feet, exuberantly and defiantly singing *Walk in the light, walk in the light of the Lord*.

N. P. Uden, 28th^t January 2024,