

Sermon: "Trusting God"

Readings: Psalm 46: 1-11

Hebrews: 11: 1-11

I remember the time I took a call to a congregation in the Western Cape. I went there at first with a view to a Call but at that time I was not yet married. During the weekend one of the ladies in that church gathered about 20 young ladies and said to me: "Pastor, I think that you should make your pick." I must confess that it scared me quite deeply because I knew that she was dead serious. Fortunately, I was courting Sandra at that time so I delayed the Call, married Sandra and then moved to Cape Town. It was a really big move for both of us very young people at that time: A new marriage, a new Province, a different culture and a new ministry altogether. But we had 10 wonderful years of ministry there.

Then we received a call to go to Johannesburg. Now, let me tell you that not many people would leave Cape Town for Johannesburg; they are two very different places. The one is a mecca for tourist and the other is a business den where people live in a vicious circle described as the rat race of material enterprise and work. But, seeking to be obedient to God, we moved. It took a while for my wife to settle down but, for me, I dived immediately into work. The environment was different; the community was very different since it consisted of middle and upper class white folk. Again, it was a new community, a different race and cultural group and a very different economic context. But we spent an awesome 11 years there and would not have left if God did not have other plans for us. I then became the General Secretary of The UPCSA.

The point I wish to make here is that we were a little afraid of the unknown, not sure how things would turn out and whether we would be happy with the moves. However, there is one thing that we knew with certainty and confidence that we were not alone, that God had called us and that God was going before us and that God will see us through. So whilst we may have had some sense of anxiety about the moves we were not afraid about the future because we knew beyond a shadow of doubt that obedience to God would bring blessings.

I imagine that this is what Abraham felt, thought and believed as he responded to God's call upon his life and that of his family's. Worse for him, we are told that he did not know where he was going but he was prepared to follow God, wherever. So follow God, he did! The writer to the Hebrews captures this well for us as he places it in the context of faith. He illustrates how Abraham exercised faith as he left his comfortable home and moved into a foreign land, how he looked forward to the city of God, how he trusted God for a child and how he responded to the test of sacrificing Isaac. We are told that his great display of faith led to the blessings of the nations. Obedience to God brings blessings.

In December last year we said farewell to Geneva as we made our move to Hannover. In a deeply touching service at the Ecumenical Centre we passed on the light of the WCRC from Geneva to here. There I made the point that the life and work of the WCRC should be seen as

one book with many different chapters. For the past 65 years we have been writing these chapters in Geneva as we ministered throughout the world as an international organization. Now we have chosen to move to Hannover and we will continue to write that same book but our chapters will be documented from here. Indeed it is the same book, the same continued history, only in a different place.

I am sure that the decision to move may have appeared to be scary for some, perhaps more so for the staff who were based in Geneva. For sure, 65 years in one place can make us really feel at home and comfortable. Moving out of one's comfort zone can be absolutely upsetting, frustrating and life-changing in many ways. The decision to move was by no means an easy one. As the WCRC we were really blessed being based at the Ecumenical Centre, it provided all sorts of opportunities, benefits and contacts with the wider ecumenical world and that we cannot deny. To move seemed absurd and non-sensible to some. Yes, we had to face the reality of addressing our financial challenges and some have said: "We can understand the need to move to a euro zone and to Germany, but why Hannover of all places? Should it not be Berlin instead? It reminds me of the question posed by Nathaniel (John 1:46) when invited to go to Nazareth. He asked, "Can anything good come from there?" And Philip responded, "Come and see." Nathaniel soon discovered that Jesus was there!

We have already discovered the presence of Jesus here in Hannover in our wonderful friends who have made it possible for us to come here. We have been moved by their concerns for the life and work of the WCRC. We have seen how churches in Germany, even some that are not members of the WCRC, have supported us financially and otherwise in our work. We have been touched by the incredible efforts of Johann, our General Treasurer, and the Reformed Alliance and our member churches in Germany to sustain and uplift the work of the WCRC, and not forgetting the efforts of the government here sometimes making historical amendments to policies and practices to accommodate us and our staff in the most comfortable and conducive way for the work we do. We have received great hospitality and a warm reception and various people have gone out of their way to prepare the way for our coming and now for our settling down. We want to acknowledge and affirm this with appreciation and thanksgiving. Yes, there are still bridges that we must cross. There are concerns that moving away from the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva will bring us into a state of isolation and struggle and not help our course as an ecumenical movement, but we rest assured that all will be well. Why?

In answering this question, I want to invite you to think a little differently with me for a moment. I like you to believe that our move to Hannover is not just because of financial reasons or the goodwill of our German friends. Could it be that God has actually occasioned this for us in our history of the WCRC at this time? Is this not God's will for us now in our journey? I believe that such a focus shifts us from human perceptions to divine intervention. It moves us from a position of a fight to an attitude of faith. Instead of fighting or resisting God's will we learn to trust and rest in God. This is what Abraham did. He was *dislocated* from his place of familiarity and comfort and *relocated* to what was supposedly an unknown destination. However, in trusting God and going forward in obedience he soon learnt that God is in control. He found that in the midst of dislocation and relocation true peace is established only when you

are *in location* with God's will. Only when you are prepared to obey the call of God do you discover that God is faithful, true and powerful. God is in control.

This is precisely what the Psalmist attempts to say to us in Psalm 46. There are two interpretations that are suggested that establishes the context in which this Psalm is set. The older view is associated with the deliverance with the invasion of Sennacherib and the newer view links it with the annual Temple ritual in which the Davidic king was saved by the intervention of the Lord. Whatever the view, I often think of this as a very busy Psalm characterized by a lot of movement, motion and restlessness. These are vividly captured in verses 2-3: "...though the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging..." and then in verse 6: "Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts." Sounds a bit rough and violent doesn't it? Then comes the punch line: "The lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." The essential message of this Psalm is that in the midst of turbulence, restlessness, and change the Sovereign Lord is in control. The God of Jacob is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. "Therefore we will not fear" the words echoed by the Psalmist are not planted in a shoddy and flimsy sense of hope but in the assurance and confidence established in the faithfulness and sovereign presence of God, Almighty. The invitation then that is extended is found in verse 10: "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." And the Psalm ends with the assurance that "The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."

Now, you might be wondering why I am focusing on this Psalm at this particular joyful event. As I said earlier the decision to move out of Geneva was not an easy one in the first place and it would have been so no matter where in the world we decided to go and settle. There are fears, concerns and anxieties that have been expressed during our time of decision and that will probably continue to be there for a little while. Change is always a debilitating factor; some take to it easily but most find it difficult. If you have any concerns and fears related to our move to Hannover, I invite you to hear the words of God: "be still and know that I am God." Let us say and believe like the Psalmist that God is in control therefore we will not fear.

Knowing that God is in control and that it is God's will for us to be here at this time in the life, work and witness of the WCRC will give us that peace and joy as we embrace our new environment and make it our new home from which we will continue to impact the rest of the world. God is the initiator of new things. There are many references in scripture that attest to this fact: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1), "See; I am doing a new thing! (Isaiah 43:19), the old Adam brought death but the new Adam (Jesus Christ) brought new life (Rom. 7: 12-21), "therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Cor. 5: 17), we live this new life through the Spirit (Rom. 8), in anticipation of the 'new Jerusalem' (Rev. 21). By making these references, I am trying to stress that God is in the business of doing new things and sometimes this could mean calling us into new places to continue God's mission. Our task then is to embrace the change and listen to the new things that God may be calling us to do as we serve God in the world.

I believe that this move to Hannover offers us a fresh opportunity to ask: “What is God calling us to do as the WCRC?” Yes, we have accepted a new Vision and Mission Statement since our founding as a new body in 2010 and we have set new priorities and outlined our programmes as we continue our work. Given our new location and some of the concerns I mentioned earlier it is apparent that we cannot continue business as usual. We need to ‘be still’, assess, evaluate and prayerfully discern what God is saying to us at this time. Where do we need to put our focus, energy and drive as we engage God’s mission in the world? What are the new strategic impact and vision, if any? How do we continue to serve the vision of “communion and justice” as mandated by the Uniting General Council in 2010? What will this mean for us now as we continue our work from Hannover? How will we continue to work with our ecumenical partners on these and other issues? All these, I believe, are important questions that need to be raised and tackled and I hope to engage the Officers, Staff and Executive on these matters as we make our way to the next Executive meeting in May 2014.

However, for now, let me conclude from where I began with the stories of my Call to Cape Town and then to Johannesburg. It is now almost 30 years since we left our place of birth, Durban. Although we go to Durban every now and then it does not feel like home because home is where we live, work and have our family in Johannesburg. We never in our wildest dreams thought that we would say that about leaving Durban or think in a new way about Johannesburg, the rat race. But here we are; the new has grown on us. We are at home and at peace because deep in our hearts we know and have learnt to accept that this is where God wants us to be for now.

This is where God wants us to be for now as the WCRC here in this beautiful place called Hannover. I hope and pray that we will embrace it with joy, delight and gratitude as we seek to engage God’s mission in the world. I know in my spirit that as we see this as God’s new location for us now as we continue the work of the WCRC, it is only a matter of time that we will be able to say like Sandra and I did, “This is my home. This is our home. This is the new WCRC home from which we will continue to write the new chapters in the life, work and witness of the WCRC.” And so, as we continue our works here in this new location let us continue to trust God to lead us because we know that God is faithful and sovereign. God is in control. We will be blessed and, indeed, be a blessing to the people we serve all over the world in God’s name. To God be the Glory! Amen!

The Rev. Prof. Jerry Pillay
WCRC President

Die Predigt hielt Dr. Jerry Pillay in ihrer englischen Fassung am 12. Januar 2014 in Hannover im Begrüßungsgottesdienst nach dem Umzug der WGRK von Genf nach Hannover in der Evangelisch-reformierten Kirchengemeinde Hannover.