

Munich Oct. 23rd. 2011

John 15: 1-11; Galatians 5:22-23. Jesus calls us to bear fruit: Paul describes it.

October at Peace Church is the time of Stewardship, the time when you think seriously about giving. But today is Harvest, the time of receiving – receiving all the wonderful things God has given us in his creation : fruit and vegetables & flowers – some many things that are good to eat & beautiful to look at – things that enrich & enhance our lives. And it's right that we rejoice & celebrate & give thanks as we do today.

But God gives us more than that: he gives us things to encourage us & inspire us & help us through hard times. That's why I love that story of Frederick the fieldmouse. The seeds & nuts & straw were important for that fieldmouse family, but so were the things that Frederick gave them to help them through the dark hungry days of winter.

God inspires & encourages us through people – people who show the harvest or the fruits of the Spirit – who bear the fruit Jesus asks us to bear & that Paul lists in Galatians – love, joy, peace, faithfulness & so on. And I want to tell you about some people who have encouraged & inspired me. They are from S.Africa – so they are part of an African harvest.

The story begins in March 1990 – Mandela released but the talks with the Government had not begun. Terrible fighting broke out between the Inkatha Freedom Party led by Chief Buthelezi & the ANC. There were acts of terror & intimidation, especially in the rural areas of Natal. As part of my sabbatical leave my wife & I were spending time in Pietermaritzburg – or PMB for short - in the Natal Midlands with a group called PACSA *PMB Association for Christian Social Action*. These are people much involved in trying to monitor the violence, to help the victims & to find ways of bringing people together.

At the height of the trouble a special church Synod was called at Kwamashu, a township outside Durban. People shared their stories of how the troubles affected them and decide how the churches should respond. A minister from a rural area, where the church was the largest building in the village, said that young men from the ANC had come to ask to use the church for a meeting, and that if the minister said “No” they would assume he was on the other side and would burn the church down. Next day a group of Inkatha young men came and said they had heard that ANC wanted to use the church for a meeting and if the minister said “Yes” they would assume he was on the other side and they would burn the church down. So what should they do ? After a long discussion the Synod decided two things: 1. That the

church should remain open to all parts of the community. It was not a political organisation, but there to live out the spirit of Christ. 2. That if anyone's church was burnt down, it would be the whole church District would be responsible for rebuilding it. Just imagine how supported that rural church felt.

That is what Paul meant by our being part of the body of XT – all different but all equally valued & so where one suffers all suffer together, where one rejoices all rejoice together.

It is also part of the African concept of UBUNTU – which was explained to me as meaning I AM BECAUSE I BELONG – we belong together because we first belong to God – therefore we become truly ourselves as we love & care for & encourage one another – as you do here at Peace Church. That experience inspired and moved me more than I can tell you.

One of the ministers at the Synod was BEN NSIMBI, serving in Edendale a rural area near PMB. One Wednesday afternoon Ben showed us round part of his area – visiting victims of the violence & intimidations rife in his area – including Victor whose house had been burnt down & had only just managed to escape with his wife & daughter & who refused to be driven out. Every now & then Ben had to stop to make sure it was safe to go on. Despite the dangers Ben went on serving his people with quietness & dignity & immense courage.

A few days later we were part of a a march to Imbali, a township just outside PMB where there had been a lot of violence, to support the people there & hold a service at the site of a terrible atrocity. Who was asked to lead the service & pray for the people ? Ben of course. Widely loved, deeply respected & one of the heroes of the new S .Africa. If only I could be half the person Ben is.

The other person I want to tell you about is NTHLANTHLA RHADEBE. It is now 1992. I'm back in Natal as a WCC peace monitor based at PACSA. At a village called Patheni a group of ANC families, against all advice, were planning to reclaim their homes from which Inaktha had driven them out 2 years earlier. It was clearly going to be very sensitive & dangerous. The police & army were there, plus UN monitors & members of local monitoring groups. Nthlanthla & I & a girl from PACSA were given the task of accompanying the ANC families as they entered the village. It got very tense. At one point we had to dive into a ditch as a gun was fired from the hillside behind us. As darkness fell there was no resolution of the problem so we began to accompany the ANC families to a school at the edge of the village where they would stay the night under police guard. Before we got to the school there was more gunfire so we sheltered under the police vehicles. When they thought it was safe to leave we got into our little hire car & were told not to use our headlights

lest we became a target. After a hair-raising drive over the rough rock strewn track we got to a tarmac road & raced to the country club where we were to rendezvous with the other monitors. At that point Nthlanthla said “I’m never going to do that again!”

At that time PACSA was writing the job-description for a Peace Worker – someone to try to get people of both sides to talk – dangerous & sensitive work. The previous peace worker, Sikumbuzo Mbatha had recently been assassinated in Imbali. The PACSA staff were pretty depressed about it as it felt as if they were writing out someone’s death warrant. That’s how it was when I left to come home.

On to 1994. I’m back in rural Natal, this time as an election observer. We were in an Inkatha area & at that point Chief Buthelezi said he would not allow Inkatha members to participate, therefore he would not allow any voter-educating to go on in that area. In fact 2 weeks before we got there some ANC voter-educators had been killed. Our first job was to locate the polling stations we have been assigned to. One was in a local hospital. When we arrived & asked to see the hall where the voting would take place, a nurse told us there was a voter-educating session going on there. We couldn’t believe it, and when the person leading the session came out who was it but Nthlanthla, who had applied for & got the Peace Worker job at PACSA.

We greeted each other like long lost friends & I told him he was a hero – knowing how scared he was at Patheni, yet now doing Sikumbuzo’s job & explaining to people how the voting system worked despite the huge dangers in that area. He tried to brush off the compliment, but then said “I am using Sikumbuzo’s bakkie & the bullet holes are still in the door, so I do sometimes think...” Another African hero whose courage I don’t think I could match.

The people of the Kwamashu Synod, Ben Nsimbi, Nthlanthla Rhadebe – people doing what they do as part of their following Jesus, bearing the fruits of the Spirit and encouraging and inspiring those around them – though not a single one of them would say they were perfect or worthy of XT. But they are part of the African Harvest & today I thank God for them & for you – for all the fruits of the Spirit, the love & courage, the encouragement & inspiration we find here at Peace Church. You are all part of that harvest. Thanks be to God.

