

This sermon was delivered by Rev. Prof Randall Prior at the ordination of Rev. Paul Dau at Footscray Community Uniting Church on 29 October 2017.

SERMON

An event of ordination is always an occasion of celebration – for the ordained, for family and friends, for the Presbytery.

Today is certainly a celebration ...but it is also more than that – it has something of ‘divine miracle’ about it, something that could only have come from the hand of God - this God who alone is able to conjure life out of death.

PRAYER

From the OT reading, these words of eulogy at the funeral of Moses: ...

Moses was 120yrs old when he died, his eyesight was still perfect and his vigour had not weakened in any way. Not before and never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel greater than Moses for all the wonders and signs and terrifying displays of power which God performed through him.

For you, Paul Dau - doubtless for many Sudanese - the story of Moses and the People of Israel holds a very special place. I discovered this on a day in the life of the Theological College community in 2010 – a day which I shall long remember. The College community was on retreat. Over lunchtime, we were invited to listen to words of Scripture.

The reader, Howard Wallace, read that part of the Exodus story where the people of Israel, having been led by Moses out of Egyptian captivity and across the Red Sea, found themselves trekking through the Sinai desert. Running out of water and food, they became depleted in body and in spirit, and with it, they became restless and discontent; they began to wonder whether they had been misled, whether they might actually be better off back in Egypt. What began as individual murmurings of discontent developed quickly into forthright vocal complaints – against their leaders, against Moses and against God.

And God responded - firing up in anger against them for their lack of faith.

The College community listened in silence to the story. At the end, we were invited – in our table groups – to offer our reflections. I was sitting at the same table as Paul. We moved around the table, one after another making our comments. Then we got to Paul. Quietly but passionately he spoke: “I don’t blame the people of Israel for complaining as they did against God – with no water, no food, out in the desert. I would do the same!” And he proceeded to recount in some detail his own boyhood experience in Sudan in the 1980s, caught up in the war between north and south – a war in which he lost six members of his own immediate family.

In 1987, he recounted, when he was ten years of age, the circumstances of war forced him to leave his homeland. Among 30,000 children, almost all of them boys, he trekked for three months over 2400km with little food and water, in scorching sun and subject to military attack. On the way, they lost close to half their number. There was every reason to complain!

The survivors finally settled at a refugee camp in Panyido, Ethiopia. They remained for more than 3 years until, with the outbreak of war in Ethiopia in 1991, they were forced to return to South Sudan. In 1992, they crossed into northern Kenya and settled at Kakuma refugee camp. Paul waited for 11 years at that camp before he became one of ‘the lucky few’ to be resettled in Australia. He arrived in 2003.

The experience left Paul with a deep desire, a quest, to find hope - where his own hope, and that of his own people had been shattered, to find meaning-in-life where so much of life had been shockingly taken away.

He found it - in the story of the people of Israel – and in the leadership of Moses – the one chosen by God, against all odds, to lead the people out of generations of slavery in Egypt towards a promised land, a land of liberty and peace, a land flowing with milk and honey. Through the decades of their trek, Moses never lost sight of this promise of God, and was sustained in vigour by this vision of liberty and abundance for the oppressed people of God – and finally, at 120yrs of age, at the point of death, on the eve of the people's entry into that promised land, was the dying Moses, with still perfect vision and unabated vigour!

Paul saw in the story of Moses and the people of Israel a basis of hope and meaning for his own people – and more - a basis of hope and meaning for all people. And he found that story fulfilled and completed in another story – the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the one whom the gospel of Matthew calls 'the new Moses' - the one in whom God works an ultimate miracle, a miracle of unprecedented love: – **God** enters into the wilderness of human life, 'Immanuel', and through his own life, his own suffering, his own forsaken death, and his resurrection from the dead, God carves a promised land, a life of abundance and liberty. He becomes bread and water of life – manna from heaven thrown care-lessly and generously into our wilderness world.

It is a promised land which is not geographical but relational ... where we may all find our home, our rest, our liberty, where all human life may flourish – socially, politically, personally - in this relentless love of God.

Therefore, says Jesus, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart ...and your neighbour as yourself. In these two c'ments is the fulfilment of all the law and the prophets.

Or in other words, by observing these two c'ments, you are beginning to walk on the land promised by God, made present by Jesus Christ, and gifted for all.

Paul, there is a sense in which your journey has come to an extraordinary conclusion – from the war-ravaged wilderness of a ten-year old boy in South Sudan to the point of celebration of your ordination here and now. Who would ever have imagined such a conclusion. It surely has something of the character of a miracle.

But in another sense, your story is at a new beginning. Unlike Moses who never did enter the promised land, you have entered it – you have experienced something of it, you have tasted its delights of liberty and abundance, you have glimpsed its reality – the scope of it, the height and the depth of it, its power to bring life out of death.

Upon this land you are to set your eyesight and from this land you are to source your vigour. You are to do so for your own people in South Sudan ... who, even today, tragically remain ravaged by war – seemingly swapping the treasure of love for the false treasures of power and wealth. You are to do so for your own people now in Australia who remain torn by what continues to happen in their own country, and whose own lives in Australia are dislocated and uncertain. You are to do so for all people who, in their own way, are making their treks in wilderness country.

And when your days are ended and your eulogy spoken, may it be said also of you: your eyesight for the promised land was not impaired and your vigour for the promised land was never weakened. **Amen.**