



The Third Sunday of Easter
19 April 2015

Coming for to Carry Me Home

**A Sermon preached at St Mary's Cathedral,
Johannesburg on April 19, 2015
by the Revd Dr Sam Wells**

Readings: Exodus 16.1-3; Mark 2.1-12

On 16 June 1976, crowds of schoolchildren gathered in Soweto to protest the imposition of Afrikaans as a language of instruction and examination in secondary schools. A crowd of around 10,000 became agitated and felt threatened when police arrived. Soon two administrators were dead and a number of buildings and vehicles were on fire. Thirty students were singing outside the Phefeni Junior Secondary School, and they too started to throw stones when the police arrived. Before long the police opened fire. 13-year-old Hector Pieterse was among those who fell. An iconic picture crossed the world, showing young Hector in the arms of his 19-year-old friend Mbuyisa Makhubo and flanked by his sister, Antoinette. This photograph came to symbolise the Soweto uprising. In the hands of the sculptor Chaim Stephenson, this image became the Living South Africa Memorial, dedicated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and standing today in London in the church of which I am vicar, St Martin-in-the-Fields, next to the South African High Commission in Trafalgar Square.

This stirring image means many things in many eras. In 1976, it was a picture of the brutality and injustice of the apartheid regime, and the solidarity and resilience of the struggle to bring democracy and the rule of law to South Africa. In 1994, it meant something a little different. It portrayed the burden the anti-apartheid movement had carried for so long. There was a sense of having crossed the line to free elections, and a sense of hope that the crucifying years of protest were being displaced by the resurrecting years of freedom. In 2013, when we at St Martin's gathered with so many South African friends to mark the passing of Nelson Mandela, the image asked a question: Mandela had carried South Africa in his arms for so long; who would carry South Africa now? Eighteen months later, with that question perhaps still hanging in the air unanswered, and with this statue now taking its place in this cathedral, I sense the image means something different again.

Think for a moment about the dynamics of redemption. We all know that the first word Christians learn in relation to hurt and injustice is forgiveness. But forgiveness can't be the only word. The reason is, because injustice, offence, and the breakdown of relationships, which together we call sin, aren't the only problem. There are two other problems. One is that once the offence has been named and confessed and repented of, and once the relationship has been restored, and the injustice ended, there is still a huge amount of damage to deal with. South Africa went through the miracle of a largely peaceable transfer of power; but it still had decades if not centuries of damage to clear up, and that was never going to happen overnight. The other problem is the lost years. Christians believe that, in Christ, the future is always bigger than the past. South Africa has a wonderful future to look forward to. But for so long, so much was lost, so much was wasted, so much was killed or allowed to wither and die. To forgive is to say 'I am not going to allow the past to shape, determine or poison the present and future.' But you still have to do something with the past, the weight of loss and death and sadness. So forgiveness can deal with the sin, but you still need to find a way to deal with the damage and the death. The word for the way God deals with damage and death is resurrection.

And that brings us to what this image of the young man carrying in his arms a dying boy means today in Johannesburg in 2015. I sense the interpretation is this. 'We carried the burden of death and damage for all those years, up to 1994. But here we are 21 years later. *Why are we still carrying that same burden?* That's the question beneath all the sadness and dismay and frustration and anger in South Africa today. Like the children of Israel wandering around the

wilderness for 40 years, people are saying, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt if this was all you had in store for us?' A lot has changed – but a lot hasn't changed, and some things, whisper it quietly, are actually worse. Where is the post-apartheid promise of a just, reconciled and equitable society, free of racial, tribal and gender prejudices, shorn of corruption and deprivation, and with enough work and power and food and shelter for every citizen; and where is the hope for each child born to grow to their God-given potential? Against such a backdrop, this statue is no longer an honouring and an affirming of the sacrifice of South Africa's children for a new dawn: it's a challenge to the authorities and to God to say, Why are we still carrying this burden, after all these years? I thought it was time for resurrection; *why is the crucifixion still going on?*

In some ways it's a harder interpretation than in 1976. In 1976 it was clearer who the good guys were and the bad guys were. Injustice and brutality were on one side, liberation and truth were on the other. But today, part of the difficulty is that it's much less clear who to blame. It's harder to point abroad to a shadowy coalition of nations propping up the apartheid regime. It's not possible to single out a religiously-underwritten ideology of superiority and segregation promoted by one part of the population. In 1994 the burden was one to be carried with pride, and the mood was one of forgiveness and reconciliation and healing and the rainbow nation. Today the burden feels more like one of resentment and impatience and growing exasperation, and the colours of the rainbow are starting to run and to smudge. Xenophobia and the defacing of statues are both ways of saying freedom is out of reach because someone else is holding onto it: either the old elites have still got it or foreigners have come in and stolen it. But what if no one else truly is holding onto it, yet it's still out of reach?

Mark chapter two tells another story of a person being carried. Four people carry a paralysed man, and they come through the roof to bring him to Jesus. And we can see straightaway that this paralysed man represents Israel. Israel is this paralysed man, the one who can scarcely walk in God's ways, the people that was called to be a blessing to the nations but right now can't even carry its own mat. In case there's any doubt, Jesus asks the question that goes to the heart of how his ministry is received in Israel. 'Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"?' In other words Jesus is asking, 'Is my mission to bring Israel the forgiveness of sins, or to throw out the Romans and set Israel on its feet again?' It's clear from this moment on, near the outset of Mark's gospel, that some people are fixed on one course and others are fixed on the other, and that people will be cross both if Jesus doesn't fulfil the course they seek and if he dares to pursue the one they don't seek. It's equally clear that Jesus is all about both. He's about forgiveness *and* resurrection. He starts by telling the paralysed man his sins are forgiven – thus infuriating the scribes who say he has no right to do such a thing, and no doubt bewildering the stretcher-bearers who presumably were looking for one outcome only. But by the time he's finished, Jesus has raised the man to his full height and sent him away, carrying his mat. A burden to others has become a carrier of others' burdens. What Jesus does to the paralysed man is an icon of what Jesus offers God's paralysed people: forgiveness *and* resurrection, dealing with not just the sin, but the death and the damage too.

The statue we're here to dedicate is a picture of a child, and young people are here to be part of the dedication. So I want to tell a children's story. My favourite children's story is by Tomie dePaola and it's called *Now One Foot, Now the Other*. It tells the story of Bobby. Bobby's named after his beloved grandfather, Bob. Bobby's a toddler. His favourite game is to pile all his building blocks, one on top of another, till they rise high into the air. At the very top he puts the one with an elephant painted on the side. He calls it the elephant block. As Bobby begins to get taller, his grandfather Bob teaches Bobby to walk, patiently standing behind him and saying, 'Now one foot, now the other. Now one foot, now the other' – hour after hour. You see young Bobby's body folded into his grandfather's as they walk together.

One day Bob has a stroke. Bobby's lost his best friend. It's a terrible ache and sadness. After a long time Bob returns from the hospital. But Bob's unable to speak or register things spoken to him. Bobby, now about 5, is determined to restore their relationship. But Bobby gets no response from

his grandfather for many weeks. One day Bobby is building the high tower of building blocks while Bob watches rather vacantly from the chair beside him. But then, amazingly but unmistakably, just as he is nearing the very top, Bobby hears his grandfather mumble the words 'Elephant... block.' Immediately Bobby knows Bob is going to get better. As the recovery gains pace, Bobby takes his grandfather outside to learn to walk again. In a glorious reversal of the earlier scene, Bob's body is folded into his grandson's as he relearns to make each tentative step. The story ends with young Bobby saying to Bob the very words Bob had once said to his grandson: 'Now one foot, now the other.' Bobby begins the story being carried by his grandfather and ends by being the one doing the carrying.

That beautiful children's story inspires us to look again at this statue and realise we are both people in the statue – we always going to be both burdens and carriers. We see ourselves in both Bob and Bobby. In the gospel story we are both the stretcher-bearers and the one being carried. That's partly about our age and stage in life. But it's also about which way things shake out. After all, the bullet that killed Hector Peterson could just have easily hit Mbuyisa Makhubo, and then no doubt this statue would have portrayed Hector and Anoinette carrying their older friend, rather than the picture we know so well.

When we look at this statue today, we recognise the power of forgiveness – that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did vital work, that the power of the sin of apartheid has been dismantled and discredited and destroyed. But we realise that forgiveness is only half the story. Half the story of South Africa, and half the story of the gospel. It's all very well for Jesus to say to the paralysed man, 'Your sins are forgiven' – but as far as anyone can see, he's still lying paralysed on the mat. The other half of the story is resurrection. What South Africa longs for today is for God to say, 'Stand up, take your mat and go to your home.' And those words seem a whole lot longer in coming. It's as if the whole country is poised between the empty cross, which has brought forgiveness, and the empty tomb, which brings resurrection. South Africa is living in Holy Saturday, still wanting to be grateful for what Good Friday brought, but yearning with every fibre for Easter Day to come soon.

And yet we still trust in the mercy and power of God. Why? Because this statue isn't just an image of South Africa in 1976, 1994, or even today. It's also an image of God. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, because he himself is not just the carrier in that statue – he became Hector, he became the burden. In Mary and Joseph at Bethlehem and with Simeon and Anna in the Temple, Jesus was that burden, that icon of our salvation. And in Mary of Nazareth and Joseph of Arimathea at the foot of the cross and at the doorway of the tomb, Jesus was the heavy burden that needed carrying and took upon himself our sin, our damage, and our death. When we see that statue in this church we see in that burden not just Hector but also the newly-born and newly-dead Jesus. Jesus was crucified to take on the sin and the death and the damage of God's people and to heal the past through forgiveness and release the future through resurrection.

Which means the hardest part of the message of this statue today is for us. Once that statue was a finger of judgement on those who were leading this country astray. Later, that statue became a statement of pride and remembrance about what it had taken to bring this country to freedom. Today it may be that this statue is a declaration of faith that the God who in Christ has brought forgiveness, is in the business of bringing resurrection too. And if that resurrection seems a long time coming, that doesn't mean it isn't coming – it just means forgiveness and resurrection don't always come at the same time. But when we realise Jesus himself became not just the carrier, but also the burden, we discover perhaps the most challenging message of all. And that is, that by resting in our arms, Jesus has put forgiveness in our hands. It seems the people of South Africa have used that power well. But maybe, as we look at this statue, we see that Jesus has put resurrection in our hands too. How will we use that power?