

You will be My Witnesses

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Sermon prepared for **25 February 2007**,

Fifteenth sermon.

Occasion: **Lent 1 – “You will be my witnesses”**

Luke 24:13-49 and Acts 1:1-11

(20 minutes)

Theme: *“We are all called and gifted to be God’s witnesses in the world”*

Once upon a time, I lived in a beautiful kingdom called Areteⁱⁱ. Originally, many generations ago, it was a kingdom of joy and peace, where everyone all lived in harmony with one another and in which our people were ruled by a good and wise King.

But the King overthrown and replaced by a dictator, a man who had no respect for others and who sought only his own pleasure. Our people experienced generation after generation of oppression by the new King. People were burdened and had no hope. Family relationships broke down, people became trapped in social vices, the rich exploited the poor, and everyone was unhappy. For myself, I cannot remember a time when we felt free or justified.

But one day, only a few years ago, the bad King was removed from his position and replaced by a descendant of the original King. It was not clear to us how this happened, as our village was far away from the palace where the Kings lived. But the change of kingship brought us hope. Hope that things would get better, hope that we could become everything we were created to be, hope that we would regain some of the paradise that had been lost generations ago.

But things were not as we expected – there was no dramatic transformation of society, no redistribution of wealth, no justice to the supporters of the bad King. Surely, there were rumours of better days and freedom. But we saw no real evidence of change. Life seemed largely unchanged and we all began to lose hope.

And then one day, a few months ago, an elderly man came to town and took up lodgings as the local tavern. There was nothing remarkable about him – he was just a quiet, harmless old man who minded his own business. In fact, we barely noticed his arrival – only later, when things began to change in town.

I think the first thing we noticed was that Mrs Pillay’s fence got fixed – it had been broken for years, and then one day it was all fixed up and painted and looking pretty. And she told us about how the old man had offered to do it for free, and did such a fabulous job. And they had tea together on the stoep, and he chatted to her about this and that and she felt her spirit lift in her, for the first time in years. We could all see the change in her, and we wondered what had happened.

And then a few days later, Mr Gregory said the old man had brought him a parcel of fresh veges, at just the moment when he was down to his last rands, waiting for his pension to come through. And the old man cooked a vegetable stew, which they ate together. And they talked about this and that, reminiscing about the past and dreaming about the future. And Mr Gregory said he felt new life welling up in his heart. Even his arthritis seemed somehow less troublesome than usual!

About a week later, little Nontando fell and twisted her ankle. And the old man was around to carry her to the primary health care clinic. And although Nontando was in a lot of pain, she

giggled quietly at the old man's stories, and insisted that he stay by her side until the nurse had attended to her.

And over the following weeks, more such stories began to emerge in the community – little things that the old man had done for people, the exchange of stories and life experiences, the sharing of hurts, the discovery of hope, the lifting of a dark cloud, talk about the new king. And little by little, the village began to experience a kind of new birth, an awakening, as if from a long restless slumber.

Even I myself, who never spoke with the old man, felt the change in the village. In my own spirit I felt an increasing discontent with how things were and a sense of optimism for how things could be. It was like butterflies in my tummy – it reminded me of my youth, when I fell in love the first time – anxious, sick and giddy with excitement!

So one day, just a couple of weeks ago, a couple of my friends and I arranged to corner the old man and ask him who he was and where he came from and what he was doing there. You see, he unsettled us a bit. His behaviour was unlike anyone else we knew of. And he seemed unaffected by the terrible history of the country, as if he came from another world. And we wanted to know more about him.

And so the old man began to tell his tale.

"I come from a village much like yours," he said. Way to the north of here, near the palace of the King. Because we were so close to the palace, we experienced the oppression of the previous King very keenly. And so we were overjoyed when the descendant of our old King took back the throne that belonged to him.

And you can imagine our amazement when, a short while later, the new King – a youngster of probably only 30 years – came to live with us in our village, just like one of us. We had never heard of such a thing! There are no records in the whole kingdom of a King coming to live as a mere citizen, a mere man. And yet he did. He stripped himself of all his nobility, of all his privileges and lived with us in poverty. When we asked him about it, he said he was just doing what his father wanted him to do. And when we asked who his father was, he just said that if we knew him, then we also knew his father.

He lived with us for a couple of years, during which time he helped us with our everyday problems – with a broken fence, with a hungry family, with a twisted ankle. And he talked with us – he really listened to us, like no-one had ever listened before – not even our own parents. And he seemed to really care for us. And we gradually experienced the knot that had formed in our stomachs over the years, we felt it easing, easing and finally it just disappeared.

For the first time in years, we felt a sense of hope, a sense of possibility for the future, a sense that peace and joy and love were things that could genuinely be experienced – not just in the future, but even now.

I guess we became his students, his disciples. Because he talked about life in a way that we had never heard before and that made so much sense. He challenged our values and assumptions. He spoke about humility, about caring for those in need, about community. And more than anything, he spoke about his father, who he said loves us.

Listening to the old man, we were awed by his words. We'd never heard such a tale. And we were jealous. "But why" we asked "hasn't the King come to our village? We also need him and what he offered to your village."

The old man nodded in agreement. "Yes", he said, "that's true – you do need him. But the King told us that he needed to go away for a while, to a place that we could not yet

go to. And he said that while he was away he wanted us to continue his work in the Kingdom, to act as his representatives, as his ambassadors, to do what he would do if he could.

"But I, and many others, told him that we have nothing to offer. We did not possess his patience and love and hope and faith. We were just broken people, with nothing special. And besides, we were terrified. And, if I'm honest, we were complacent – life was comfortable and what he was asking for seemed to bode discomfort.

"But he was adamant. He said, "You will be my witnesses in the world. I will send my spirit to dwell in you and to empower you and to remind you of everything you have learned from me. And you will be my witnesses".

"When I continued to protest, he said that I needed just three things: a calling, a gift and a willingness to obey.

"I protested, "But my king, I have had no calling." But he disagreed. "I call you now" he said. "I call all of you. Every citizen of my Kingdom is called. You don't need an additional call. What I have called you to is what I call every citizen to – to be my witnesses in the world."

"And I realised that he was telling me that every person who is part of his Kingdom is called to be his witness. This is not a unique call to only some citizens, in the way that some are called to teach or to lead or to heal. This is a universal call to all of us who trust him. And with that realisation, I felt my reluctance begin to falter.

"But nevertheless I protested, "But my Lord, I have no special gift. I'm just an ordinary man – an old man at that. I've used up everything that I have in years of labour. I have nothing special to offer anyone else. I have no abilities or powers to impress people."

"But he disagreed. "I have gifted you already, as I have gifted every citizen of my kingdom. There is not a single person in this kingdom who does not have at least one gift. Being gifted is part of the package of being a citizen – there is no citizenship without gifting. Your problem is that you have not recognised the gifts that I have already given you – that lie dormant in you."

"And as he spoke, I realised that I was indeed gifted – not with spectacular gifts of healing or prophecy or teaching. But I had an ability to care for people – to meet their everyday practical needs. And I had an ability to encourage and strengthen people. And as I pondered on these abilities, I realised that they were not merely abilities, they were indeed gifts – gifts that the King had given me, gifts that I had never fully developed or utilised, gifts that he wanted me to share. And again, I felt my reluctance falter and virtually grind to a halt.

"And so I concluded, "So all that is left is my own willingness to obey you. Is that all?"

"And he looked me straight in the eye and smiled and said, "Everything that I have, I have given to you. I have held back nothing. I have given all of my love, all of my power, all of my glory, all of my gifts and even my very life. The rest is up to you."

"I didn't sleep that night. I ran through his words over and over in my mind, grappling with my heart, seeking clarity. "My Lord," I prayed, "show me the way." And yet, I knew the way.

"The next morning, as I awoke, I remembered that I was called to be a witness to my King, I remembered that I had been gifted with the gifts of help and encouragement, and I remembered that the one who had given me everything was asking me to

willingly obey him. And so I was resolved, to fulfil my mission to witness to my King and to the Kingdom that he was establishing in the world.

“Now many of my friends were witnessing right there in our village. But I felt I needed to move on. I am no better than they, but I felt I should move to another village. And so I began to walk. And eventually I ended up here. And so it is here that I am fulfilling the call to witness to my King.

And with that, the old man fell silent, as if lost in his memory of the King.

And my friends and I wondered at his words. We wondered at his testimony about this great King of whom we had heard of but never met. We wondered at the evidence the old man had shown by his actions and by his kind words – evidence that pointed to the truth of the King. We wondered at the call that he shared with us, and wondered if we too were called and gifted and willing.

ⁱ I was asked to preach on the theme of “You will be my witnesses”. I selected the readings, but decided to not preach a regular exegetical sermon, but rather a fable. I wanted to cover material that is already quite well known, but in a fresh and indirect way. I did the Acts reading and then pulled a bar stool into the centre of the church and the microphone stand and sat down and began the story.

The faces of the people were really lovely to watch – childlike. Everyone giggled at the opening words, “Once upon a time”, and when they realised I was really going to tell a fable, I could see them settling down like for a bedtime story.

I got good feedback from several people, who commented especially on the emotional impact of the narrative, which is exactly what I was going for.

In my own mind, I had Garisson Keillor as my role model (from the Lake Wobegon Days radio broadcasts) – not that I was anywhere as deft as he is, but that was what I was striving towards.

ⁱⁱ Greek for excellence or virtue or goodness.