

*(please be seated)*

**Sermon**                      **Father Michael Lapsley, SSM**  
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**Cape Town, South Africa**

Peace be with you. I greet you all as companions on the way – followers of Jesus the crucified and risen one.

When I was first asked to preach this homily to you today – I felt deeply honoured – but that feeling soon gave way to fear if not terror - how could I possibly have something worthwhile to say at the end of this great assembly? Would God give me the words to say – words of Life – words that would indeed lead us towards Justice and Peace? Often, God's Holy Spirit is the one who disturbs us when we are comfortable and comforts us when we are disturbed. Can I, too, disturb and comfort you in God's name? After my fear subsided a little, I decided that I would do what I have done before, which was to write to all my friends – people of all faiths and no faith – including my Facebook friends, asking them to share with me their reflections on this passage from their own contexts across the world. God is not limited in the way wisdom is delivered to the human family. For example I regularly read my NRSV Bible downloaded free on my Samsung phone.

How has been your experience of this Assembly? We all came with our own expectations. How was your spiritual state as you arrived – what has happened to you in these days and how are you now? Was it a roller coaster or rather steady? Which stories have imprinted on your souls and pierced your heart? What made you angry? What will you never forget about the 10th Assembly? I pray that all of us will leave here inspired by God's Holy Spirit to be Christ's co-workers in the struggle for justice and peace.

How are things in your life, your family, your local church, your denomination, your society, your country? What is your gender? Do you come from a place of conflict? Do you see yourself as a member of a majority or a minority, tribally, racially, linguistically, sexually? Are Christians a minority or a majority in your land? Do you see yourself and your people as bystanders, victims or victimisers or would we dare to admit we could be all three at the same time, even if in very different measure?

We all come to Scripture from the context of our own lives, as well as the way we have heard passages of scripture interpreted in Bible studies and from preachers and, most importantly, from how the living God has spoken to us at different stages of our own lives. We began this Assembly with the account of the Resurrection just before this passage from Luke. It was the first time in my life I heard the Gospel sung in Aramaic – as the scholars tell us – the language that Jesus spoke. That passage set the tone for our journey during these days.

Now we continue looking at today's passage: Luke 24: verses 36 - 49. One of the first things that struck me is how much emotion permeates the passage. When Jesus appeared to the disciples, they didn't recognise him. They were blinded by their overwhelming grief. Any of us who have lost those we love dearly, know what it means to be overcome, even consumed by grief. Some never manage to pick up their lives again. I know for myself that losing a limb is like losing a loved one. Having lost both my hands, not to mention one eye has meant that grief is a permanent dimension of my own life. On a lighter note some of my friends told me I was always one-eyed.

Verse 37 says that the next time when Jesus appeared they were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. Interestingly, two of them had already seen the Risen Christ but it had not taken away their doubt. "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering..."

On our life journey, ambivalence, doubt and contradictions are not unusual experiences and exist within the journey of faith. Lord I believe, help my unbelief. Years ago, a friend said to me, "I can see contradictions in what you say!". "So?" I responded. Even as we grow in faith and confidence in God it is

normal to have times of doubt and uncertainty. Personally, I worry about those who are totally certain about everything ....There seems to be little space for the Holy Spirit of God who leads us into all truth.

"Why are you frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" Jesus points to his wounds as evidence of both who he is, but also of the Resurrection. In this passage we see the body, mind and spirit coming together: "Touch me and see"— touch – something which I appreciate keenly in its absence.

A number of the Resurrection passages bear witness to the reality that the risen Christ was also the crucified Christ. But the wounds were no longer bleeding; they had healed. Jesus reminds his disciples of what he had told him before his death that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and then enter into his glory.

Jesus identifies himself and his destiny with all that is written in the Hebrew Scriptures. Suddenly we are in a Bible Study with Jesus as the teacher. "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures."

What about the broiled fish? I am not sure. But I am reminded of the words of a former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, that Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions. Our faith journey is not a spiritualised journey – which denies our physicality – nor are we called to escape from or deny the reality of creation and our part in it. Rather, the spiritual infuses the physical and becomes a way of viewing the whole.

Please allow me to bear witness to my own journey of crucifixion, death and resurrection – a journey we are all invited to participate in through and since our Baptism. I appreciate that some of you will already know my story. I was born in New Zealand in a Christian family and brought up to follow Jesus for as long as I can remember. I was what some people in the United States call a cradle Anglican. That discipleship took me to the Priesthood of the Anglican Church and into the Society of the Sacred Mission (SSM), an Anglican religious order. SSM sent me to South Africa in 1973. It was there that I felt I had stopped being a human being and became a white man.

After being expelled from South Africa in 1976, I joined Nelson Mandela's African National Congress and played a chaplaincy role in Lesotho and Zimbabwe. Living with a people in exile brought alive the exilic material in the Bible. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion."

Some of us will be forever grateful for the prophetic role of the World Council of Churches in setting up the Programme to Combat Racism and the Special Fund under the inspirational leadership of Dr Philip Potter. No one should underestimate how much hope and encouragement that gave to all those in the front line of the fight against racism regardless of their faith journey. Indeed God was on the side of the poor and the oppressed.

Allow me to fast forward to the events of 1990. Nelson Mandela was released after 27 years. In April of the same year, the Apartheid state sent me a letter bomb hidden inside the pages of two religious magazines. As you can all see, I lost both of my hands, an eye and had damaged ear drums and...and. In the midst of great pain, I felt that God was with me. God had not stepped in and said it is a bomb, don't open it. I opened it. To me the great promise of scripture had been kept – "Lo I am with you always to the end of the age". I felt that Mary who watched her son being crucified understood what it was that I was going through.

Excellent medical staff in Zimbabwe and Australia helped to heal my body – but it was the prayers and love of the ecumenical movement, together with those of many faiths, not to mention the atheists and agnostics who helped to heal my soul.

Today I stand before you all to say Thank you: Your prayers, your love was the vehicle God used to help me make my bombing redemptive – to bring life out of death – good out of evil – to travel a journey from being a victim to being a survivor to being a victor.

Just as a rich cross section of the human family walked beside me on my journey of healing, so today I choose to walk beside others on their journey of healing – through the Institute for healing of memories. When I was in hospital coming to terms with the permanent character of my disability I remembered once seeing an icon which showed Christ with one leg shorter than the other. The icon picked up the Isaiah 52 and 53 passages that the Messiah was marred beyond human semblance – disfigured ... that none would desire him.

Many of us with dramatic physical disabilities have had our own experiences of people looking at us with a mixture of horror and pity and then turning away. In reality those of us with the most visible disabilities – physical and mental – are icons for the whole human family. We illustrate dramatically what is true for all of us – that "messed-up-ness", brokenness, imperfection and incompleteness is the human story – just as many of us cannot survive or manage without the compassion and helpfulness of other human beings, so it is true for all of us – that we need one another to be fully human.

When the disciples were on the road to Emmaus and Jesus appeared, the first thing he did was to listen to them, to their pain, grief, confusion and sadness before he began to help them make sense of their experience. Perhaps all of us, but especially we who are clergy, need to preach less and listen more. As the cliché goes, it is not accidental that God gave us two ears and one mouth. I have discovered as I am sure that many of you have, that pain is transcendent and that it can connect us to one another. Especially when we listen to one another.

Our opening worship began with words of lament from every continent – bearing witness to the poor and downtrodden of every land. In the Pre-assemblies and in the ecumenical conversation and in the plenary sessions, as well as at the Madang we opened our hearts to hear each other's pain – pain that imprinted on our souls – many bravely became vulnerable. We were also inspired by stories of courage, faith and compassion, not least by those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence – especially against women and children but we also heard about rape as a war crime, particularly of women but also of men.

In our context in South Africa when a black mother sits with a white mother and says that her child never returned from fighting apartheid, the white mother may reply, my child did return but is still damaged by what they experienced. Suddenly they are both mothers united by the pain they carry.

How many of us have been moved by the images of North and South Koreans meeting each other in the demilitarised zone after decades of separation – the pain is palpable as well as the joy.

In response to my appeal for help with this sermon, a Jewish friend who lives in Israel wrote about the intergenerational pain that many Jewish people still feel which includes our failure as a Christian family to acknowledge our part in their suffering. As an Institute for Healing of Memories, we belong to an International Network for Peace which includes the Parents Circle – Palestinian and Jewish mothers united in the pain of having their children killed.

Often when we are able to listen to each other's pain we can become committed to work together for an inclusive justice. Also when we listen to one another's pain the division between "us" and "them" disappears and we all become just "us". Our experience of a common humanity is profoundly deeper than all that divides us or makes us unique and different.

My friend Jane Alexander, the Anglican Bishop of Edmonton, put it this way. "I was just reflecting on a recent experience I had at a hearing for the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) here in Canada. I think what resonated with me as I read the reading was the reminder that for true peace and reconciliation to even have a chance you have to be physically present one with another. We had an opportunity to be in a church reflection circle with former residents and family members from the residential schools. In being close enough to one another to hear a breath, to share tears and to make space in the circle for the Spirit to come there is a sense of creating sacred space. It seems to me that Jesus comes to the ordinary place of the disciple's lives and makes it holy, by his presence and by his words".

His Holiness, Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians reminded us of the deep intergenerational pain caused both by the Armenian genocide and the failure of those responsible to fully acknowledge it. Your Holiness and All Armenians – may I today say from this place, we have heard what you said – your people did indeed suffer a great wrong. May the Great healer accompany you so those wounds may truly heal to enable all Armenians to also help others on their own journeys of healing.

I pray that the new Central Committee will recognise programmatically that healing of memories is something whose time has come in the human family.

Thank you, Your Holiness, for reminding us "to regard our fellow human beings, without exception, in the full dignity and holiness of their personhood." In the last few years many of our faith communities, not least my own, have torn ourselves apart over issues of sexuality and in particular in relation to same gender loving persons, not to mention the gamut of other sexual minorities. Some would say this is a sideshow in the face of war and poverty. That is true if we focus on sex and blind ourselves to the elephants in the room. But if this is a matter that affects, according to the most conservative estimates a minimum of 1% if not 4 or 5% of people living on the planet, can it really be a side show? Today I want to say as a Christian, as a priest, to all the LGBTI community, I am deeply sorry for our part as religious people, in the pain you have experienced across the ages. I have a dream that in my lifetime, I will hear all the leaders of all our great faith traditions making the same apology.

Some would say that it all comes down to the interpretation of God's word. For me the question is: Do we believe that Revelation ended with the closing of the Canon of Scripture or does the Holy Spirit of God continue to lead us into all truth?

Whilst we have been here in Busan it was decided in Germany that children could for the first time be registered as male, female OR the space could be left blank - an historic step towards relieving and acknowledging the pain for those who are born intersexed or find themselves to be transgendered. We know as St Paul taught us that in Christ there is neither male nor female.

In the 1970s, the cutting edge of the prophetic witness of the ecumenical movement was the Programme to Combat Racism which was not without controversy. Where is the cutting edge of the ecumenical movement going forward – however controversial it may be?

While there have been very significant victories, we all need to be seized with the on-going battle against racism, and the struggle for gender inequality and the end of gender-based violence and the violence against children. There can never be peace in the world whilst inequality increases within countries and between countries. Greed is killing us.

But what are the elephants in the room? We have come here to Asia to the continent where the great religious traditions of the East have much to teach us about the importance of the internal spiritual journey. Even as we celebrate our own spiritual treasures.

It should shame all religious people everywhere on the planet that a significant number, some would say a growing number, of conflicts in the world have a religious dimension. If we want the human family to live together in peace there is a great urgency for what some of my Latin American friends call "macro – ecumenism" that brings together not just Christians but all the world's great faiths with a respect too for indigenous world views. Let our witness be through the depth of our compassion, our willingness to listen and learn, not simply to tolerate but to reverence and respect. As John told us: I have other sheep that are not of this fold.

Our leaders in the faith invited us here to the Korean peninsula where we have been showered by the kindness and moved by the faith of our Korean sisters and brothers. But we cannot be blind to the reality that the Korean peninsula is a giant armed camp with both sides possessing colossal weaponry. My dream is that this peninsula may become a zone of peace renowned by its commitment to negotiations and the healing of old wounds. I believe that the cutting edge of our prophetic witness must include lobbying

against the arms trade. What a terrible irony that the five countries who are the largest suppliers of arms are the five permanent members of the security council, together with Germany, and the main recipients are developing countries. As Christians we are called to be unequivocal that armed conflict as a way of solving international disputes is incompatible with the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The crucified and risen one invites us to look at and touch one another's wounds – to listen and to hear the pain of each other and so become one. But it is not just the human family that is riddled with pain – it is Mother earth herself that is crying out more and more desperately. How many more natural disasters have to happen before we realize that the future of human life on this planet is in jeopardy? Surely something which so many indigenous cultures always understood has to go, as fast as possible, to the top of the agenda for all of us on planet earth.

My dear Sisters and Brothers, I often ask myself: “Why did you survive a bomb that was supposed to kill you?” So many others deserved to live but did not. I think it was important that some of us survived to bear witness to what war and hatred does to the bodies and souls of people. Much more importantly, I hope that in my own tiny way, I can be a sign that stronger than evil and hatred and death are the forces of justice, kindness, gentleness and compassion - of peace - of life - of God.

And so as Benedictine Sr. Ruth Fox, OSB (1985) said:

**May God bless you** with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

**May God bless you** with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

**May God bless you** with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

**May God bless you** with enough foolishness to believe that you really CAN make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

God of Life lead us to justice and peace.

AMEN

*(please rise as you are able)*

♪ 21 **Until all are fed**

### **Prayer of thanksgiving and intercession**

L: God of life, we are grateful for the ways in which we have been challenged and moved by this Assembly. We give thanks for the hospitality of our Korean hosts. We pray for the healing and unification of this land and beyond as we carry home the stories of faithfulness.