

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY CANTATE

(Cape Town - 20 April 2008)

Text: ² And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God ³ and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: *"Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. ⁴ Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."* (Rev.15:2-4)

As a Rugby nation we tend to remember those matches when we won against the All Blacks. Because the All Blacks are such a great team, winning against them is always very special moment. I recall in particular one match played about 7 years ago, when we won the Tri-Nations for the first time. The match was played in Kingspark in Durban. I wasn't there personally, but we watched it over TV at home. By half time the All Blacks were leading by at least 10 points. With about 20 to 15 minutes to go they were leading by a massive 20 points.

We had a gathering of our congregation later that afternoon. So I said to Maggi: "Come on, lets go. I can't watch this anymore." But as we got up, the Springboks scored. We sat down again. Five minutes later they scored again. From that moment on the stadium was transformed. People weren't only shouting. They started singing, 60 thousand people: "Ole, ole, ole". The stadium roof almost lifted. And the players were carried along by the song. In the last minute Bobby Skinstad did his "famous dive" for the winning try. It was great!

The point that I am trying to make is: People whose hearts are filled with joy, invariably start to sing. It is incredible. But for whatever reason "joy" seeks expression. And if the joy is really great or exuberant speech simply doesn't suffice. It needs song, it needs to be shouted.

I bet you sitting in that stadium in Durban, were thousands of people that never sing. They wouldn't dream of singing at home, or joining the school choir. But on that day anticipating the victory of the Springboks, song just took over and swept the both the masses and the Springboks along.

Where there is joy, there is song. I see it often with my son, Peter. If he has a good day at school, I can hear him arriving home. Long before I hear the wheels of his bike, or the garden gate opening, I can hear him whistling a tune, and sometimes even singing a song he learned at school from Mrs. Van Tonder, the new music teacher.

Singing is not primarily a matter of being gifted. It helps, of course. But where there is joy there is song. And where there is song, there is joy.

Christians sing. And by the way this is something quite unique. I am not sure whether you have noticed: Buddhists don't really sing. They prefer to meditate. Muslims don't really sing either. Five times a day they kneel on their mats and they say their repetitive prayers. But Christians

sing. You don't get a church service, where there is no singing. Singing is part of the way we do church. And we sing, because there is joy in our hearts towards a most wonderful and loving God who has saved us.

You may interject at this point and say: At St Thomas we don't sing so well. Yes, you are right. We don't sing well. And as congregation we need to stand up and take action. If *you* have the gift of music and can play a positive role here, step forward. God wants to use you. Music is one of the greatest gifts from God. And by the way, here it doesn't matter if the song is not sung perfectly. We just sing to the glory of God.

But you may also interject and say: Surely as Christians we cannot sing all the time. Life is difficult sometimes. And indeed, it seems as if we are facing a rather difficult future in South Africa. Interest rates are up. Electricity is up. The fuel price is up. Violence is up. Uncertainty with regard to the future is up. The only thing that is down, is our emotions. How can we sing, if we fear that what is happening in Zimbabwe could also happen to us?

But let me tell you, when that lovely song was sung, which I read to you from the book of Revelation, the future for the Christians then, 2000 years ago, looked extremely bleak. In fact, it was far worse than anything in Zimbabwe now.

In the year 60 after Christ, the Roman emperor called Nero, started a gruesome persecution of the Christian. Some were thrown to the lions. Others were crucified on mountain tops surrounding Rome and a set alight as human torches in the night. Legend has it, that even the apostle Paul was killed by Nero.

In ancient times Nero was referred to by the number 666, the number of the beast. If you take the Hebrew alphabet and number it, A being 1, B being 2, and so on, and you take the name "Caesar Nero" it adds up to exactly 666. He was the beast of ancient times.

After Nero the Christians had a bit of break. But at the time when the book of Revelation was written there was a new emperor called Domitian. Some Christians believed that in him Nero himself had returned to torture them all over again. Domitian released a decree that everybody was to address him as: "My god and my lord." He was worse than Robert Mugabe. People that walked passed his empty throne in Rome and to bow down. He also created an image of himself, referred to in our text. It was a statue three times the size of himself. And rumours were that people that would refuse to worship this image, would be killed.

It was tough times for the Christians. But do you know what? They sang! True, they weren't always worship songs of praise. Sometimes they were songs of lamentation in which they expressed their fear and begged God for greater faith.

But here in our text something special happens. John, the writer of the book of Revelation, sees the heavens open. And he sees the throne of God on the shore of a mighty sea. The sea has no waves. Indicating, there is no turmoil, no evilness. The sea is like a plate of glass radiating total peace. And beside the sea John sees all those people, a multitude of people, who were faithful to

God and victorious over the beast and his image.

And he hears them sing a song. It is an extraordinary song. It is called the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. We know who Moses was, and the Lamb, is of course, Jesus who gave his life on the cross. They sing both songs intertwined with one another.

It is difficult for us to determine what the song of Moses was. But there is such a song in the book of Exodus. It was sung by Moses, his wife, Miriam and all Israelites immediately after God has rescued them from the Egyptians as they crossed the Red Sea. On that day there was no hope for them. Pharaoh and his army had cornered the Israelites against the sea. A massacre was going to take place. But God opened the sea. By the mighty hand of God, the Israelites walked straight through and were saved from the Egyptians.

The song of the Lamb is even more wonderful. We all know, those Israelites saved at the Red Sea died at some point. But then the Lamb of God came, hailed in the book of Revelation as the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. Through his death he broke the chains of hell and death, once and for all. Here was complete freedom.

That is the song sung by the masses of believers that John sees. John himself and the other Christians were fearing the worst. But there in heaven were those Christians killed by emperor Nero. They were not conquered. John sees them as victors. They are with God and they are singing a song of glory. They are praising the marvellous deeds of God.

The song was recorded to encourage faithfulness. The threat to our faith is today, of course, very different from the first century. There is no beast at the moment in the form of an emperor or a ruler. But the threat is there nevertheless, just more subtle. Friends may distract us from faith. Our eagerness to be successful in life may distract us from faith. Plain apathy or slackness may distract us from faith.

But in heaven the martyrs are singing. And that song is for you and for me. They encourage faithfulness - not by appealing to our own strength. They don't do so, not with a single word. They just point to God. "Do you realise who is on your side?", they say. They sing his glory and they want us as a congregation to start singing as well.

Worship of God is not only important, it is essential. And coming to church means: I am looking for singing partners. I am here today, because I want to praise God. And if I am downhearted, the praises of others become a sermon to me.

I am not sure whether you always follow the words, when we sing. As noted, we don't always sing well at St Thomas. But the words we sing, are great.

From the martyr song, we learn two important aspects of worship. Worship is, on the one hand, retrospective. Often we sing songs of what God worked in the lives of other people that lived before us, like Moses. We sing the song of Moses, the song of Luther, the song of John Wesley. And we are reminded: God has always been faithful. And then we look forward, and sing the

songs of those who have completed the race, those who await us in heaven. And in between these two songs, the song of Moses and the song of the victorious Lamb, we live our lives and sing our songs. Our songs are reflections on God's faithfulness in the past. And at the same time they are songs of hope in God who never changes.

So if you are downhearted, if you struggle with your faith, if the future scares you, don't forget to sing. There is power in song. And there is power, because Christian song focusses on God. We become downhearted because we focus on ourselves, or because we focus too much on the things of this world.

The prophet Isaiah writing from experience, writes: ***"Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint"*** (40:30-31). Amen.

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