

Greetings in the Name of Christ from Grahamstown!

Thank-you so much for sending me on this exciting journey to the College of the Transfiguration in Grahamstown, South Africa—to teach our fellow Anglicans halfway around the world, and to learn from them.

I have been here about 9 weeks now, and so have had a good opportunity to get settled at the College, and to explore Grahamstown as well as the surrounding, “eastern cape” of South Africa. This is a beautiful part of the world; and because it is in the southern hemisphere, the seasons are reversed—so I arrived in the throes of summer, and have been basking in warm temperatures and sunny skies ever since (and was even able to swim in the Indian Ocean several weeks ago!). Perhaps God is also calling you to “take up [your] cross and follow” him in this way (Mark 8.34)—to leave the wintery weather of the upper midwest, with its sub-zero temperatures, ice, and snow!

My principal task has been to teach a course on sacraments to 20 seminarians who are preparing to be ordained in the Anglican church, and we have had wonderful, vigorous discussions. At the same time, I am serving as a resource for the wider church in the community of Grahamstown; I recently preached at a local parish on Sunday morning, for instance, which was an honor and a delight.

Established as a “frontier town” by British settlers in the early 19th century, Grahamstown sits about 80 miles northeast of Port Elizabeth and 36 miles west of the Indian Ocean, in the generally poor province of the Eastern Cape. Race remains an uncomfortable problem, the legacy of apartheid only having been abolished fifteen years ago; and, I am learning, one of the measures of Christian integrity in such a context is to be able to speak honestly about how the problem continues to haunt the prospect of a genuine, South African democracy.

The College was the white seminary—St Paul's College—for the (Anglican) Church of the Province of Southern Africa. In the early 1990s, however, St Paul's became “College of the Transfiguration,” effectively incorporating two other, black Anglican seminaries, as a kind of herald of a (hopefully) democratic and reconciled South Africa. Today, of the approximately 60 students, perhaps 5 are white, 15 colored (that is, mixed race), and 40 black.

What a gift, in this place, to be able to engage a multiplicity of languages, races, and individual stories as these are set in, and drawn into, the context of common prayer by God's Spirit! In this way, our relative identities, culturally bound by time, place, language, and experience, are relocated, formed and transformed, by the singular round of Office and Mass that gives voice to a corporate identity in the body of Christ.

A final word. I spoke at the beginning of this letter about having been sent by you as a missionary, and so I have. I am reminded, however, that we are in fact all “sent,” and therefore all called to be missionaries. In the post-communion prayer, at the end of every celebration of the Holy Eucharist, we say: “Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart.” Did you know that the word “mission” literally means to be sent? One way to remember this is to think of the word missile, which comes from the same, Latin root. In the words of the post-communion prayer, therefore, we effectively are being fired out of the church building back into “the world”—both the Christian and the non-Christian worlds—to, as the prayer indicates, love and serve Christ in our neighbor with new vigor; indeed, with “strength and courage,” to live the faith that we profess.

Not all of us are called to travel “to [or from!?] the ends of the earth” to serve as missionaries (Acts 1.8). And it's true that this kind of work, even when it is undertaken on a short-term basis as in my case, involves some measure of renunciation—“leaving everything” to follow Jesus (Mt 19.27),

including the familiarity of home, friends, and loved ones. As our Lord said, however: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12.24).

In a real sense, this is the original, missionary text—reminding us of Christ’s mission from the Father: to be incarnated, and then to sacrifice himself on our behalf, and after three days rise. After death comes resurrection; after Holy Week comes Easter!

Gratefully yours in Christ,

Christopher Wells

(written on Palm Sunday)