

Sermon  
Blessing & Dedication of Holy Cross School  
Grahamstown, South Africa  
February 4, 2012

As a teenager I quite loved cartoons, and among my favorites was a comic strip called Peanuts, created by an amazing artist Charles Schultz, a man of deep faith and a shrewd observer of human life...always a dangerous combination.

The comic strip addressed every sort of topic, including theological or religious topics that were usually off limits for such artists. And it was for me a kind of primer in these areas, raising questions I had never thought of and putting into perspective some of our peculiarly American religiosity, often by pointing out its absurdities and deflating the balloon of its many hypocrisies.

A recurring setting for these lessons was the baseball diamond, that arena of classic American sport where the experiences of winning and losing, of trust and betrayal, were explored by the principal cartoon character, Charlie Brown, a kind of ten-year old Everyman, and his close circle of friends: Lucy, Linus and Schroeder.

One Sunday cartoon strip remains vivid to me to this day. Charlie Brown is standing on the pitcher's mound in the middle of the baseball diamond looking very unhappy. In the bubble above his head he is saying: "Nine home runs in a row! Good grief! What can I do? We're getting slaughtered again, Schroeder...Why do we have to suffer like this?"

Schroeder responds: "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward."

Charlie Brown: What?

And then Linus, the resident philosopher and budding theologian explains: "He's quoting from the Book of Job, Charlie Brown, seventh verse, fifth chapter. Actually the problem of suffering is a very profound one, and..."

And the debate begins. Lucy interrupts: "If a person has had bad luck, it's because he's doing something wrong, that's what I always say!"

Schroeder: That's what Job's friends told him. But I doubt it...

Lucy: What about Job's wife? I don't think she gets enough credit!

Schroeder: I think a person who never suffers, never matures. Suffering is actually very

important....

Lucy: Who wants to suffer? Don't be ridiculous.

Schroeder: But pain is a part of life, and...

Linus: A person who speaks only of the “patience” of Job reveals that he knows very little of the book. Now, the way I see it...

The final panel has a bewildered Charlie Brown looking at the reader and saying: “Good grief! I don't have a ball team. I have a theological seminary [college].”

We do learn about God, about theology, about faith and life everywhere...including on the playing field. Every place is potentially a school, every event in life potentially a classroom. And if we are aware enough and open enough, then every single human encounter can be a theological college of the most profound sort.

Oddly, I am reminded of this cartoon today because of the Bible verse from the book of Job quoted by Schroeder: “Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.” I was, I must confess, not much of a Bible reader as a teen, but I have never forgotten that verse. It is so very poetic, so very memorable. And so very, very true. “Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.”

We all know trouble. And no one is exempt, though it does seem that some get more than their fair share.

When the Order of the Holy Cross came here 14 years ago, it was at the invitation and encouragement of many, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who felt that a religious community without some of the familiar colonial baggage might be a welcome presence or seed in a country that was rapidly changing, coming out of an era of tumultuous troubles signaling the end of Apartheid and the emerging hope for a new South Africa, a better South Africa. It was an exciting and heady time.

But we asked ourselves: What are we to do here? Where would our work, our ministry lie? The answer was to wait upon the Lord's leading as we remained faithful in prayer and in monastic living. And it did not take long for the needs to surface. And then one Maundy Thursday, that holy day inaugurating the Church's annual observance of the saving death of Jesus, just across the road from here, two young boys died, run over by the train from Alicedale. It was a terrible tragedy—one of those troubles that the Book of Job speaks of and about which we can make little or no sense. But what came out of it was this: that for the Order of the Holy Cross here in the Eastern Cape, our work, our ministry—whatever else it might be about—must include and be about the children.

And so it started: first transporting children into town for school after the local farm schools had closed, then establishing scholarship/bursary assistance, then helping with after school studies, and finally starting a very small, very simple one grade school to help prepare the young ones for future studies. And now this....a school that is welcoming, modern, effective, safe and beautiful, as befits all God's children! Out of that Maundy Thursday tragedy, something new and unexpected has come.

This physical building itself arises out of another trouble, another tragedy. In November 2008, our Holy Cross monastery in Southern California burned to the ground in a wildfire. Unfortunately, the insurance coverage was not enough for us to rebuild that beautiful hilltop monastery and guesthouse which had been our home for more than sixty years. But it allowed us, among other things, to construct this building that we dedicate today. Here, almost literally, Job's saying proves true: "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." But out of those sparks and out of those ashes more than 15,000 kilometers away something new and hopeful is rising.

Now I don't for one minute believe that our God willed or desired that Maundy Thursday tragedy. And I don't for one minute think that God desired or directed the burning of our California monastery. That's not the God we see revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ. But I do believe that it is a sign of God's love and of God's nature and of God's ongoing creative power to take the troubles, the tragedies and the limitations and disappointments of this life, and reweave them into something new and beautiful and life-giving. Brothers and sisters, God did it most dramatically with Jesus whom he raised from the dead, and through him God continues to do it today with you and me and with South Africa and with all creation.

Today we celebrate the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple as a child of 40 days. It's a wonderful feast, one that lets us see Mary and Joseph bearing the Christ child and offering him to the Father. Today we too join that joyful procession. And what we offer and present is this school. We present it first to God, for as our liturgy reminds us: "All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee." We present it to God so that through the gift of learning, language, art, mathematics, science, and human community God will be glorified and honored, because those most precious to him, the little children, are themselves being honored and nurtured and formed.

And we present this school as well to the children...to those 28 students currently enrolled here but also to the many hundreds who, God willing, will study here as we expand in future years that they and others might become more and more what God intends them to be: God's living image and reflection.

And we present this school to the many who have labored to make it possible—friends, parents, neighbors, staff, supporters and benefactors, and generations of ancestors who

have longed for a new day. May this school be a small but real fulfillment of that ancient dream and longing.

And we present this school to the people of this area and to the whole Eastern Cape as a resource and perhaps even as a laboratory and a model of new directions in childhood education.

As Mary and Joseph presented Christ in the Temple, so we today make this our offering. In the larger scheme of things and of world history, it is a very small offering, a mere seed. But with God's grace and with our continued prayerful support and help, it can bear much fruit, touching one life at a time, changing one family at a time, until God gathers in a fruitful harvest multiplied a hundredfold. Because God does those kinds of things. That's how our God works!

Today's Gospel reading concludes with these words: "The child [Jesus] grew big and strong and full of wisdom; and God's favour was upon him."

That is our prayer today...for all the children here today, for all the children of Africa, and for children everywhere. May they grow big and strong and full of wisdom. And may God's favour be upon them all. Abundantly.

Amen.