

Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him  
in Hebrew 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher)."

- John 20: 16

Today we are gathered at this Cathedral Church of St Alban, the Martyr, Pretoria to mourn the loss of a dear soul, a mother to countless younger people and women in our country over a very long time, a mentor to many, and an exemplar of an extraordinary and gifted life. That she was popularly known to all and sundry as "Mama Emma" was no misnomer or an empty attribution of respect. It was deeply meant to all who felt so moved to name her, and it came out their experience and love of her.

But the inevitable has happened. Mama Emma is no more. Her children mourn, we mourn. This nation mourns, flags fly at half-mast as a sign of respect. Our hearts are troubled. And so it should be. She was one of a kind, so generous in her readiness to share her maternal instinct, so giving materially to any who were in need, so fulfilled in her love and readiness to love; and just as colourful and elegant in her dress sense, and so particular about how she presented herself. She was always an elegant lady – a revolutionary in stilettos! She was a loving mother to her family, a community activist and among friends she was a faithful friend and neighbor. To her intimate friends she was simply, "Tiny!"

Mama Mashinini was surely all of that and more. We need to bear in mind that we dare not categorise her in a linear fashion. She is perhaps better known as a feisty trade unionist, a formidable activist for social justice. In our church she was a struggle heroine, one who lived the values of the gospel, and in whose life prayer she was an anchor that held together one's diverse characters, and in worship she found her being as a child of God.

For us as the human family, death and dying produces a flood of emotions and ambiguity. There is the loving embrace of our mother and all that she represented, her teachings, her smile, and favourite food, and her loving ways, and moments of anger and dispute, of suffering and of triumph, in sickness and in health. It is about the good life in its totality. For that we remember her, and we thank God for her.

That is the life we celebrate. And yet, or because of it, there is also a profound sense of loss and bereavement. The inevitable has happened, and what we would, if we could have delayed as long as possible, comes into full cycle. We mourn, and all manner of emotions become hard to ward off and keep away. Forgetting is not an

option, embracing in love, and the attraction of that which we might not have wished becomes our comforter. The one who is no more is forever present; our loss is our gain, because the one who is no more continues to live in us. Her memory is what comforts us. We desire to know that which we are conscious of as unknowable. We push the boundaries of knowledge, and we ask questions that are unanswerable.

Wits University social scientist, Achille Mbembe, puts this very well in a recent book, *A CRITIQUE OF BLACK REASON*, when he says, talking about race and which I translate into the experience of mourning and bereavement, that the experience of separation, of putting away, of loss is hardly that which we wish, but one that is to be expected as inevitable. It is not just forgetting or locking up our consciousness into an iron cage. It feels us with a profound and physiological pain and suffering, a bitter-sweet memory and remembering. We wish we could have done more, we cannot avoid at times the feelings of regret, and we wonder about the possibility of the impossible. This loss is an obscure feeling and that which we do not acknowledge. It is obscure and shadowy, expressed in mourning and melancholia – and, in his words, it is a desire for the obscure and unreachable desire, a nostalgia for that which is doomed to disappear.

In reality it is that sense of loss that produces the spirit of rebellion, of outrage, of freedom, and of the contemplation and overcoming of that which might have been, but is no more. It is the imagination that makes many of the questions we harbor ultimately meaningless, and we embrace the limitations of thought and understanding, an imagination “that it escapes the limitations of the concrete, of what is sensed, of the finite...” It is in the power of the imagination that we hold the possibility of memory or of reunion with that elusive past.

In the gospel reading from John’s Gospel, the first thing that we note so powerfully, is that the passage begins with “But...” The New Testament does that to signify a turning point, a change in the narrative – the unexpected, if you like, against the flow of the story. There is a turning point in the texture of the narrative, in meanings and imaginings. Having been thus prepared to expect the unexpected, we are swiftly drawn to the mind of the characters: Mary Magdelene, the disciples, the angelic figures – and the absent Jesus who becomes present, but no longer entombed. We are aware especially, of the persistent the human questions, the frustration of not knowing, that preoccupy the mind of Mary Magdelene: *they* have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him. No answers are forthcoming. These are questions without answers, or that are unanswerable.

Mary Magdelene was at the tomb early to perform the burial rituals associated with the ones one loved dearly. She got there early “while it was still dark.” She saw that the stone had been removed. She then runs to report this strange happening to the elders: was it suspicious? Was it supernatural? It was sufficiently worrying and disturbing for her to notice as to raising it with everyone she came across. She then makes this remarkable observation: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, *and we do not know where they have placed him*” (20:2). They (the apostles/disciples) then accompany her back to the burial place, and their “seeing” is a little bit more than that which Mary herself had seen first time round, and from which she had come to the conclusion that “they had taken away our Lord”. They ‘saw’ the linen wrappings. “They saw and believed”. Strange that is. Instead of producing or confirming what must have been their lingering doubts, instead it confirmed their faith. What that faith was, the writer does not tell us.

But for Mary that was not the end. She stood there, helpless, weeping, flooding in her own thoughts and imaginings. Looking into the tomb, she could now “see” more than they had previously seen: two angels in white were occupying the place where Jesus had been. In response to their enquiry about her distress, she repeats her previous observation and puzzlement: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” For Mary there is this puzzling “*they*”. There is a cognitive distance between those who belonged to Jesus and who were mourning his death, and “the others” who are not part of their community, and *they* could do such a dastardly deed. All she wanted was to know where the body might be so that she could do the rituals that were a duty of care and of love. She is deeply puzzled, but does not have any answers.

In her state of utter confusion she then turns around and she “sees” Jesus standing there. She recognized him without the certainty of knowing who he was. She reckoned that he was the: “gardener”. She supposes that he is the caretaker of the cemetery, she sweeps aside the direct question that is asked, and she shoots back with her own questions: “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” This is a bold response, and one that could have got her into trouble because this Jesus had been convicted of treason. It is a moment of identification with a felon, a moment of commitment. She put her cards on the table. She thus laid her own soul bare.

At that moment, Jesus says to her “Mary” and she replied, “Rabbouni!” (I can imagine that this was instinctively). She did not have to think, and she might have even surprised herself. She replied “Rabbouni!” that is to say, “Teacher!” That was his identity. That is how he was known. That was his self-disclosure. One can imagine a

moment, or a split second of mutual identification. For her, it could have been both relief, and fear, and shock. But it was also a time of joy, of recognition, of overcoming. This was “the Rabbouni!” the Teacher. There is the confidence, and joy of knowing. That is all. What she had been enquiring about was right there in front of her eyes. What had been was no more. None of the earthly deeds and rituals of love and respect were necessary any more. Jesus had defied the inevitable. The tomb could not contain him. He had transgressed the bondage of human nature. He had transcended the power of confinement.

I imagine that Mary could not believe her eyes. The immediate, human response was to touch, hold, embrace, but Jesus held back, “I have not ascended to the Father...” For him, his moment of Glory was not yet. It was a case of “already” but “not yet”! A difficult state and condition for Mary surely to take in. She had to live with this incomplete knowing because she could not exercise all her senses as she had wished. Instead she was sent to the disciples with the message: “I am ascending to the Father, to my God and your God” (20:17). She saw with her own eyes, heard his voice, but could not touch him. How then could she confirm that indeed he had risen? The hardest thing at times for human nature is to accept that which we do not know, and we dare to know that which is unknowable.

As we all know, out of this Biblical episode, has been built a whole theology of the Resurrection. It states that the Jesus of the flesh, of history, had become the Christ of faith; that the evil of the world could not triumph. That would not have been possible without a profound sense of the imagination. It is the imagination that takes one out of one’s body, out of one’s skin. It is the imagination that stretches the capacity to envision that which had hitherto not been possible, and to dare or confront the possible with the unknowing. In some ways that is what makes human believing such an exciting thing.

I am suggesting that the generation of the likes of Emma Mashinini. a Johannesburg girl born into the obscure life of apartheid South Africa; a worker at a very young age, whose future might have been confined by the rigidity of the race laws, oppressed by the limitations apartheid dished out to her, hemmed in on all sides by cultures and customs of patriarchy. In many respects apartheid was a tomb – there to be forgotten and finished only to be at the mercy of one’s loved ones for whom rituals of life and passage have meaning, and make us human. There would have been a moment, I am sure, when it dawned on her that she was not to live her life in totality in the sphere of the garment worker, or as a mere chattel of men and circumstance. She was a liberated woman. She became the Mary Magdalene who knocked on doors, asked the uncomfortable questions, sought unpleasant answers, pushed the boundaries

between life and death. She it was who brought the men-elders to “see” for themselves what she had seen. She it was who confronted the angels, and to the man who greeted her “Mary!” she made the connection between life and death. She knew who he was. “Teacher!” she cried.

Emma Mashinini was always looking beyond, challenging the present to produce outcomes of hope and of human nurturing. She represents for me that movement some of us associate with, of Christian socialists who believe that the sharing equitably the resources of God’s world will produce more holistic and more flourishing human communities. And so she did not shy away from the calling to struggle against all forms of injustice, to have a hand in building a workers movement in our country, and to the church to bring to bear the good news of justice and peace. That life was from beginning to end a life of struggle. I am struck by the fact that she embraced, in all the episodes of her life: as a mother and a worker, in the trade union work, in the women’s movement, and as a church worker, her time at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and at the Commission for the Restitution of Land Rights where she ended her working life – she brought a vibrancy, vitality and a challenge that made the purveyors of lies, and bullies to shake in their boots. And so, she led workers into strikes for a just wage and more humane working conditions, and in the church she was among those who campaigned for the ordination of women. In this Cathedral Parish I remember that she persistently persuaded the then Dean to open a branch of the Mothers’ Union! As was the case in the Christian socialist movement, and the Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement it was never possible to separate the various phases of one’s life. They held together like the Trinity – indivisible and integral to the art of being human. Her world was shaped by the struggle for justice, and by life and faith.

Now, we all know that the country that Emma Mashinini lived and would have died for is in deep pain. It is pain that has been inflicted by some of her comrades. It is pain and hurt caused by selfishness and greed, and blatant violations of all that is sacred in the struggles of the working class. Day by day, with each passing day, service delivery protests by community activists even to the point of death by Andries Tatane confronting the might of a police state, the workers at Marikana are killed by police bullets while protesting against the injustice of slave wages, with each day that women and girl-children are found dead, raped or sexually molested in our communities and at our university campuses; with each day that the poor go hungry at night, and homeless, to name only a few of the atrocities that have become part of the daily grind of our lives in South Africa today, Emma Mashinini would be there as a reminder that it should not be like that. Her association with Corruption Watch and

CASAC, and Save South Africa speak to her ongoing commitment to find a better world. In our church she stood out and spoke against any form of injustice.

Any society without any moral order, and for whom moral agency was a threat and not an opportunity, is a society bereft of any real sense of right and wrong. In fact, I would go further and say that such a society ideologises that which is evil and seeks to present evils ways as justifiable and necessary. Such a moral order produces a less caring society where we no longer serve as our brother or sister's keeper, but where selfishness becomes a credo of life. Moral agency ensures consistency in the application of standards, and that at the end, make sure that no one is left behind, makes it possible to have reasonable expectation in life and ensure accountability. That is the world that Mama Emma wished to leave behind in South Africa. Much has been done to undermine that dream, but the question is what are we doing to confront the evil that confines us to the margins, as if we do not matter. That "Mary" moment, that moment of reckoning must come to us too.

Jesus said to her, "Mary!" and she turned and said to him in Hebrew "Rabbouni!" May the spirit of Emma Mashinini bind us together; may truth and justice prevail.

Amen.

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