

Introduction

This day is a very important day in our life as a community. We all want Christ Church to be a community that is worth belonging to. We want this to be a place where God is honoured and worshipped and where we grow as followers of Jesus. We also want this community of faith to be influential in the community of Kenilworth, Cape Town and even the rest of the country. These are high expectations. I would like to suggest that they are statements of conviction. These are not things we want for ourselves only, they are things that we believe are important for the community and they are, to some extent, the reason why we have chosen to be part of this worshipping community.

I want to look at our dedication in the context of the ancient statement of faith which the Israelites made under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. I believe that even though this statement of faith is three thousand years old, our dedication today is reflected in every part. As I look at this I trust that we will learn something about the statement of faith known as the Sh'ma, and also be able to reflect more profoundly on what we are doing as we dedicate today.

1. The First aspect of Dedication is to give attention.

The statement is found in Deuteronomy 6:4

**Hear, o Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!
And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your might**

Hear! O Israel.

This is command. A command to attract the attention not just of an individual but of a whole community. Time to stop what you are doing, stop what you are thinking and give your full attention. This speaks to me of the fact that we live such busy and full lives that it is important to stop once a year at least, to focus again on what we are dedicating ourselves to. Jesus would have said this statement at least twice a day as part of His devotion to the Father – the call to stop can change your life. I always associate the story of blind Bartimaeus in mark 10: 47-49. When he heard that Jesus the Nazarene was passing he shouted out have mercy on me! Now there's an attention grabber if every there was. People in the crowd tried to shut him up but he would not. Verse 49 is one of the most marvelous verses in the Bible. It says "Jesus stopped". The lord of the universe was stopped by the cry of a blind man. Now if the Lord of the universe stops at our cry how much more should we stop when we hear His command, "Hear, O Israel!"

Today is a day different from all the other days of the year in this community. On Dedication Sunday we stop to affirm again our commitment to the things we believe are essential.

2. The Second aspect of Dedication is Reflection.

The community of Israel is called to reflect on “*I am the Lord your God*”. Why do we come here every Sunday? What is it for which we work so hard? Why is all this energy expended? Primarily it’s not for us, nor for the community outside, it’s not for a good cause, nor even for the nation – it’s for the Lord or God. This is why we do these things and make sacrifices of time and expertise, of money and personal resources. It is for the Lord.

Do you remember the wonderful description of the gentile believers who decided to express their love for the God of Israel by helping their impoverished Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem? (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)

*¹And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ²Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. ⁵And they did not do as we expected, **but they gave themselves first to the Lord** and then to us in keeping with God’s will.*

Let me tell you a modern equivalent of that story that Edith Sher tells. She heard the story told at a meeting of Jewish women in Cape Town. It seems that the chairman of the Jewish Board of Deputies was invited by a church in Mitchell’s Plein, to attend a service and to speak to the congregation on the needs of the Jewish People here in South Africa and in Israel. He was a little nervous traveling into the neighbourhood and not sure that he would be able to find it. “Don’t worry”, the pastor reassured him “you will know you’re at the right place when you get here.” Sure enough as he turned into the designated street he saw a few churches but only one had a giant menorah outside. When he had finished speaking the pastor pressed an envelope into his hand and said, “This is a collection God told us to make for your community please use it as you see fit.” The chairman remonstrated with the pastor, “Your community has more need of this than mine”. The pastor insisted and so he left with the envelope. When he went into the Board of Deputies office the next day he gave the envelope to one of the secretaries to open. After a while she called him “That envelop from the church in Mitchell’s Plein - there is seven thousand rand in it.” Apparently there

was not a dry eye in that office. Now this story of the grace of God at work in a congregation who gave themselves first to the Lord and then to the Jewish Community was told at a Jewish women's meeting. How's that for the authentic Gospel?

It is only this kind of devotion to God that produces the life giving creativity of the Kingdom of God.

3. The Third aspect of Dedication is Focus.

This idea of focus is picked up in the phrase "*The Lord alone* or *The Lord is One*".

When we dedicate ourselves we restore our focus. The word dedicate means to be devoted to something. Sometimes we use the word to denote a computer system or server that is set aside for a particular function – this may be called a "dedicated server". In the Sh'ma the Israelites are being reminded that the Lord is the only Lord who is worthy of their dedication. By implication dedication shared by any other lord would negate the Israelite's dedication to God.

Sometimes like the soil with weeds in Jesus' parable of the Soils we allow other things to crowd in on us and steal our time, energy and even our money. Like the seed that fell among the weeds the cares of this world choke the efforts we have made to serve God and so we come to restore our focus again. To look intently at what God has called us to do and to count the cost so that we may apply ourselves to the task at hand.

Dedication narrows our vision, focuses us on a point so that our participation in the community here is intentional and goal directed.

4. The fourth aspect of Dedication is counting the cost

The Israelites were called to "Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

"*With all your heart*" - with both your inclinations, the good inclination and when you are dealing the evil inclination – we are to be infused with the love of God thus fulfilling the instruction of Proverbs 3:6 "Know Him in all your way";

"*With all your soul*" – even if He takes your soul (Rabbi Akiva)

Rabbi Akiva compared the Jews without Torah study to a fish out of water.

The (almost) complete version of the story is as follows:

The Romans forbade the study of Torah but still Rabbi Akiva taught Torah publicly. [When asked why,] Rabbi Akiva answered with a parable: "A fox was once walking on the side of the river and saw fish swimming quickly back and forth. The fox asked the fish, 'Why are you fleeing?' 'Because of the nets that people are bringing for us,' responded the fish. [The fox] said to them, 'Do you want to come up on dry land and you and I will live together...?' [The fish responded], '...If we are scared for our survival in the place where we can live, all the more so in the place where we can't live!'" "Similarly," Rabbi Akiva

said, "If this is happening to us while we are studying Torah, about which it is written 'it is your life and the length of your days,' all the more so [that we should be scared] if we weren't studying Torah!"...It was not long until Rabbi Akiva was captured and thrown in jail... When Rabbi Akiva was taken out to be killed... [he said, "I am now fulfilling the verse which says, 'And you shall love your G-d...] with all your soul,' even if He takes your soul..."

Now you may, together with me, struggle to imagine such dedication but this is the kind of dedication for which we strive. To live for God as a living sacrifice means just that.

So Dedication means that we count the cost. Talking about counting the cost, the rabbis are agreed that the last part of this expression of love is primarily about money "*With all your might*" - With each and every measure that's measured out to you. - Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi - Rashi) with all your money; alternatively, the Hebrew, *uv'chol m'odecho*, rendered as "and with all your might," can be interpreted to imply an obligation to acknowledge G-d for any measure He metes out, whether it be a measure of kindness or a measure of suffering.

5. Finally dedication is entrusting the future to the faithfulness of God

When we dedicate ourselves we do so not knowing what lies ahead of us. But this does not mean that it is a leap into the dark. As one preacher said, "I don't know what the future holds but I know who holds the future." When we entrust the future to God we are making an active statement about who we believe God to be.

Remember the man who buried the talent instead of using it creatively. He was unable to use the talent because of who he believed his master to be. **(Matt 25:24-25)**

24 *"And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, **I knew** you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed.*

25 *'And **I was afraid**, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.'*

There are two phrases that stand out for me in this servant's explanation for his behaviour. "I knew" and "I was afraid." Often our fears about trusting God and stepping out in faith are based on what we think we know. Yet the record of God's dealings with His people tells a very different story. There are many here today who can give personal testimony to God's faithfulness in their own lives. Dedication is a challenge to believe and trust – entrusting our future to God.