

TRANSCRIPT OF SERMON BY SENATOR DAVID COLTART,  
CHRISTCHURCH, KENILWORTH: 7TH DECEMBER 2008

“Nevertheless, each one of you should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let that trouble you – although if you gain your freedom, do so. For he who was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ’s slave. You were brought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brothers, each man, as responsible to God should remain in the situation God called him to.”

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Good evening, everyone. It's wonderful to be here. It's a special delight for me because Christchurch holds a special place in my heart. I became a Christian at UCT in June, 1981, and that itself, as I think with many of our conversions, was a miracle because, let me tell you, there is no one more arrogant than a fourth-year Law student! And..it took the dogged determination of three young men, two of whom came from this church. One of them is sitting right there this evening – Barry Jessop. It was their dogged determination which the Lord used to reach out to me, and to bring me to faith.

And it was after my conversion that I was privileged to fall under the teaching of David Cook. I found so many of his sermons enriching, but one in particular stands out. He was preaching from Matthew 5, verses 13 and 14. “You are the salt, you are the light of the world”. And that sermon had a profound impact on me; and when Jenny, my wife, and I graduated from UCT we believed that the Lord wanted us to remain in the nation of our birth, to be 'salt and light' in Zimbabwe.

And let me tell you that many of our friends and family at the time, thought that we were mad. Both sets of parents, both Jenny's folks from Fishhoek and mine, from the Eastern Cape, had left Zimbabwe, had emigrated from Zimbabwe in 1980. They had seen the advent of Robert Mugabe's rule, they had seen that 'the writing was on the wall', and they decided to leave; and I think they hoped that we wouldn't return home.

But as I say, we felt this very distinct call on our lives, and so we started married life together in February 1983, and those of you who know your history of Zimbabwe will know that January and February 1983 were the months when Robert Mugabe deployed his North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade into Matabeleland – into the South-West of the country, where we started our marriage. Indeed, we went into the very vortex of the Gukurahundi, the genocide committed against the Ndebele people by Mugabe's Five Brigade. We've now been in Zimbabwe over 25 years, and as you've read in your papers even this morning, it is worse than ever. We are afflicted by hyperinflation. Thirteen noughts have been taken off our currency. When I left Zimbabwe last Thursday, the Rand was trading to the Zimbabwe dollar at 100 BILLION dollars to one, and bear in mind that that hundred billion is with the thirteen noughts taken off! So it comes to a figure that is quite beyond my comprehension.

We've seen the collapse of our health and education systems. Indeed, in meetings that I've addressed recently, I described it as “a perfect humanitarian storm”. You might have seen that movie “The Perfect Storm”, where you get this convergence of meteorological factors creating a storm which is unprecedented in its power and velocity. Well, in Zimbabwe we now have this perfect humanitarian storm. We have the unique and unprecedented convergence of AIDS, of poverty, of malnutrition, of a Government which deliberately keeps the true knowledge of this to itself; and finally, now, on top of everything else: cholera.

A perfect humanitarian storm...causing unbelievable suffering that is hard for South Africans to fully appreciate. In that context, I was elected to Parliament eight years ago. I was elected on a promise that I, that the party I represented, would deliver democratic change. The party I represent is called the Movement for Democratic Change. But as we all know, Zimbabwe is now more undemocratic than ever.

We live, in short, in a country where there is an extreme crisis and where there is an extreme sense of hopelessness. The conventional worldly wisdom, no doubt, is that any person who finds himself in that situation should get out of it as quickly as possible! The challenge though, for Christians, and that's the challenge that I want to address this evening, is: how, as a Christian, do we offer hope in such a situation? What is our role, as a Christian, in a country that suffers from this extreme crisis, this extreme sense of hopelessness? And it's in that context that these verses read out this evening by Jeremy, have been of such great comfort to me; and I think, provide us

all – not just those of us who live in Zimbabwe – but all of us who face trials and crises in our lives. We find, I think, profound teaching in them.

There are two broad lessons that we learn from these verses found in 1 Corinthians 7. The first is what I term 'the general rule'. The general rule, in a crisis, is that Christians should 'stay put'. Note the theme that goes through these verses. Verse 17: “Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned him, and to which God called him”. Verse 20: “Each one should remain in the situation which he was in, when God called him”. And Verse 24 repeats exactly the same: “Each man should remain in the situation God called him to”.

Now we need to understand what those phrases mean. What does “place in life” mean in this context? What does “a situation” mean? Obviously, from the broader context of these verses, this refers primarily to one's status or position in society rather than one's physical location. The context of this passage is relevant. If we read the earlier verses, Paul speaks of a woman staying in a marriage with an unbeliever; and, of course, in the verses read out to us, Paul refers to slaves and says to slaves, “Stay as slaves” - so it is more about a person's position and status than physical location.

We have, of course, the reminder of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19: “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations”. That is an instruction that Christians don't have to necessarily remain in the physical location they find themselves in, but they have to go out and evangelise the world. And of course, as we know, Paul himself was a real gallivanter, he travelled widely. So clearly, this is not an instruction that all Zimbabweans or all South Africans are to stay in Zimbabwe or South Africa simply because they were born there. Our 'place in life', our 'situation', means more the environment that God has placed us in.

And so, what is that environment? What has God given us, as Zimbabweans or as South Africans? Well, let me take you through a few things. He has blessed each one of us with a 'mother tongue', a language that we know intimately. He's blessed all of us with a history. All of you here this evening as South Africans have a common history, a common experience of life. You have been through apartheid together; you have been through the fear of the 1980's and the great joys of the 1990's, you have shared that together. And the same for us, as Zimbabweans. The Lord has blessed us with a knowledge of South African culture, and the customs, and your humour – your wonderful, hilarious advertisements! And of course, the Lord has blessed us with

our friends, those deep rooted relationships that we have...and our family, both our blood family, and our church family. What we need to understand is that the Lord has given us all these blessings, given us all these gifts, for a purpose. Our parents, our friends, our church brothers and sisters are not given to us by the Lord randomly...God has given all of these blessings to us for use in achieving *his* glory, *his* purposes, for extending *his* Kingdom here in Cape Town, here in South Africa, here in Zimbabwe.

And I think, what comes through this as we consider it in the context of the Great Commission, which is evangelism...is that evangelism is difficult enough without the added barriers of language and culture, those differences in culture. Evangelism is far difficult enough as it is, and the Lord gives us all these other blessings of this common knowledge, to work effectively in that most important task that we have as Christians. And it is for that reason that we should rather remain where we are...remain in a marriage that we find ourselves in, even to an unbeliever, so that we can be a blessing to our husband, we can be a blessing to our children.

But also, that is why we are to remain in a community we know, because that is where we can be the most effective. In other words, what I'm saying is that our default position as Christians is to remain in the country that we know, where we have ties, irrespective of what happens in that country, for better or for worse, on sunny days and rainy days. Now I stress that this isn't an absolute rule. Paul says in Verse 21 to slaves, "if you can gain your freedom, do so". The Lord Jesus himself, facing an unjust trial, facing his crucifixion, asks God (recorded in Matthew 26): "My Father, if it is possible may this cup be taken from me". So those verses indicate that it's not an absolute rule. Yes, we can be called out of a stressful situation – but the default, the natural position is what Paul says – he would rather that we remain in the situation we find ourselves.

The danger, though, is that it is easy to accept that teaching when things are smooth in a country, when things are smooth in our marriage. The danger comes when we face either personal or national crises, and many of us assume that because we come under great trial, that that is the Lord's signal that we are to move out of that situation, that we are to avoid that trial, that time of trouble by leaving it. And the Church, not just in Zimbabwe but the world over, is sometimes culpable. The "health, wealth and prosperity" teaching that pervades so much of Christianity these days misleads Christians into thinking that the Christian walk should be easy. But in truth, every Church in fact should have a warning outside of it, and that warning is: Beware! If you come into this body, if you adopt this faith, you're going to have trouble!

Trials, and troubles, and tribulations are part and parcel of a Christian walk. As we know in James 1, it says “Consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials”. Whenever! They will come, they go with the territory. The point I'm simply making is that trials and difficulties are not good enough reasons for Christians to move out of a situation. They're not good enough reasons for any Christian to leave Zimbabwe at the present time – in isolation. And certainly, exactly the same applies to South Africa and South Africans.

I find that it is often when Christians fear that there is going to be a drop in their standard of living; or perhaps white Christians fear that their children might lose their sense of identity because they go into a classroom where they are suddenly a minority, that they begin to make these decisions to move. We've seen it in Zimbabwe. I suspect that in South Africa, perhaps even in this congregation, in the last few years many Christians have chosen to emigrate because of the crime rate, because of BEE, because of the difficulties of working in a multicultural, multiracial environment...because perhaps of the fear that South Africa may go the same way that Zimbabwe has.

Let me reiterate: it isn't a sin to emigrate! Some people have no choice. For some people, and I see it in Zimbabwe, it is the only responsible thing for a person to do, if they want to save their lives and look after their children. But we cannot avoid Christ's concluding remark when he was pleading with the Lord to take 'this cup' away from him. He goes on to say: “But Lord, yet not as I will, but as You will”. In other words, when we face these trials in nations, unless the Lord very clearly calls us out of that situation; unless he demonstrates that his will is something different than that 'default', we are to remain put.

Now, this perhaps sounds all very grim. Are we just required by God to rough it out, to live our lives through sheer grit, through grim determination? No, of course not. We don't serve a cruel God. If we read on in James, it says that trials are there for our benefit. We become better people, we become people who persevere; we are refined through trials. And let me say this to you – lest you pity Jenny and I, and our family. Our experience of living through these trials in Zimbabwe over the last twenty-five years, and especially the trials of the last eight years, is that we've been blessed abundantly – to the extent of our cup flowing over. Although we've lost the security of pensions and a nice medical aid scheme, and a police force that actually fights criminals...we've actually learned so many other things, and through that we've been blessed.

We have been challenged, more than anything else, about where we place our trust. Do we place our trust in our medical aid company, do we place our trust in our insurance companies, or do we place our trust in the sovereign Lord? And through that we've been – as I say – wonderfully blessed. Through that we have developed a new perspective on the meaning of friendship and family. Most importantly, we have been challenged as deeply privileged people, as we are, about the profound humility, the profound wisdom that we find in poor people who live all around us, how much they can teach us through their humility.

And so, this is this first lesson that we learn: that the general rule in a crisis such as Zimbabwe, is that Christians are to remain in the situation, and face those trials unless the Lord calls us out clearly.

Secondly...the second general rule that we learn is that when we become Christians, we lose the right to respond to any crisis as individuals. In Verse 22 we read: “For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly he who was a free man when he was called, is Christ's slave”. You were bought at a price – and Ephesians 6 reiterates that, it talks of us being “slaves of Christ”. What this means, is that when we come to faith in Christ, we forfeit the right – especially in times of struggle, of stress – we forfeit the right to respond to that situation individually. I stress that that applies in bad times, but of course it applies in good times. Because we were bought at a price, because we've become Christ's slaves, we are subject to the Master's bidding, not our own will.

Tied into that, is the notion that when we become Christians, we become part of a 'body' of slaves, a plantation community if you like! In 1 Corinthians 12:24 we read: “God has combined the members of the body so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it”. And in 1 Corinthians 12:27 we read, “You are the body of Christ, and each one of you” - each one of you, each one of us - “ is a part of that body”.

One of the major problems of our Western culture, of our civilisation, is that we have all become so focused on the individual, on the nuclear family, on this materialistic world, on what is best in our interests – and in that, we have forgotten about the community. The wider community, but also the community constituted by a church like this. I've seen it in Zimbabwe and I know it in

my own life, that we are all guilty of making decisions by ourselves when we face crises; and those decisions are generally governed by the notion of what is good for us. In other words, we make many decisions in response to a crisis, without regard for the wider Body of Christ; and what has happened in Zimbabwe in this regard in the last eight years, is shocking and instructive at the same time – and I suspect the same applies in South Africa.

In general, in Zimbabwe, it has been the strong in society, the leaders – including pastors, the young people, the educated, the employed, the mobile who have left the country, and have left behind the weak, the widows, the orphans, the homeless, the grandmothers. Many of the 'shepherds' have left. In this regard I have a lovely story that a good friend of mine (Martin Morrison, some of you may know him – he was one of my mentors at University). But he often jokes about the difference between getting a call to pastor a church in Hillbrow, and Hermanus. And he says that if you're in a church in Hermanus, and you get a call to move to a church in Hillbrow, you respond by saying “thank you very much for the call, I will pray about it and let you know”. And if you're in a church in Hillbrow and you get a call to pastor a church in Hermanus, you go to Hermanus, and pray about it once you've got there!

I think that that, sadly, is what has happened in Zimbabwe. Many shepherds have left, at the very time the grazing fields are ablaze, where the sheep, where the flocks are distraught and confused, the shepherds have left. And they've left their flocks behind – terrified, leaderless, and threatened. And the same has happened in families. The young have left, leaving behind the old and the infirm. I think that the lesson in this is that if we are indeed slaves in Christ, we no longer have the luxury of making decisions ourselves, without regard to the wider community. Indeed – and I speak to the leaders in this church and in the wider society – leaders have a special responsibility imposed on them. The strong have a special responsibility imposed on them, to remain in a crisis situation.

I must admit, as I journey to South Africa, as I listen to the debates taking place in South Africa, I am concerned by some of the things I see, especially in the White community. It seems to me that what happened in Zimbabwe in the last ten to fifteen years is in many respects happening in South Africa; where the more mobile members of your community, those with wealth, those with good educational qualifications, are emigrating to the safe havens of Australia and New Zealand; and that includes, sadly, many Christians. It shouldn't surprise us when people who do not have a faith in God make decisions like that, but I think that as

Christians we need to be deeply challenged if, when we have this apparent faith in God, it is us who are making the decisions to place our faith not so much in God and his plan for us in this nation, but in a foreign Government.

And so, I want to leave a challenge to all of you here this evening: those of you who are unsettled by the prospect of Jacob Zuma coming to power, who are unsettled by the financial crisis, who are unsettled by crime in this country and the inability of the Government to tackle it, who are considering whether you should perhaps not move to safer shores: we need to be challenged on what we are placing our faith in. But it needs to go further than that. We need to be challenged about the role that the Lord has for each one of us, not just in South Africa but in Southern Africa. And we need to be challenged about the ripple effect that inevitably occurs when young, strong people leave a community like this; the ripple effect which undermines the capacity of those left behind.

But my purpose this evening is not to leave you crestfallen and gloomy and depressed! I want to encourage you, in closing. Because in challenging each other we also need to encourage people, all of us, as we face the trials and the uncertainties of living on this exciting continent, Africa. The instruction for us to remain in this situation, to face up to these challenges, is not a blind, callous instruction given by a merciless God who lacks compassion. Rather, this instruction needs to be seen in the following positive light. I'll leave you with six areas of encouragement.

Firstly, the Lord that we serve is Sovereign. He was in control yesterday, he has been in control of our entire lives up to this point, and he is a consistent God – he will be in control tomorrow. He IS in control of South Africa, he IS in control of Zimbabwe. He understands what is going on in Zimbabwe – he is a sovereign God.

Secondly, Scriptures teach – and let me tell you from personal experience...this is true... that God has a perfect plan for each one of us as individuals, AND a perfect plan for our nations. Where we get it wrong, often, is that we don't understand God's timing. But if we look at Scripture and if we look at history, we will see that God has a perfect plan. I leave you with two of my favourite Psalms – Psalm 7 and Psalm 37. Zimbabweans know me very well, with those verses! Psalm 7 talks about us not being surprised about evil men. They will dig holes for other people to fall into, but the promise is that they fall into those holes themselves. And of course Psalm 37 is the Psalm that says, Don't fret, don't fret when you see evil men apparently getting away with their wicked

schemes. The time will come, and the time will come shortly, when you look about, and you won't see those people any longer. And history shows that those Psalms written thousands of years ago are true. They applied to Nazi Germany, they applied to the fascists in Serbia, and they apply to Zimbabwe. They are our promise!

Thirdly, both Scripture and historical experience show that it is in times of crisis and seemingly hopeless situation, that God uses that. The best example of that is the Cross. Can you imagine the disciples, standing at the foot of the Cross, thinking that this was the worst day of their lives? That everything that they'd worked towards was just being destroyed before their very eyes? And yet, as we know, it was in that seemingly hopeless situation, that extreme crisis, that God actually worked his most powerful miracle - for us, here, today.

Fourthly, both Scripture and historical experience show that God uses the small, the weak, the powerless in any society to achieve His purposes. I've just read a truly magnificent book this year by an American called Jim Wallis called "Reviving Faith and Politics" (<http://www.amazon.com/Great-Awakening-Reviving-Politics-Post-Religious/dp/0060558296>), and he makes this comment in it. He says, "Majorities normally don't change things". Majorities? I've got that right! Majorities don't normally change things. Creative minorities do, and the majorities normally go along in the end. He quotes from an anthropologist, Margaret Meade, who once wrote: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has". And that is true. It is the weak, it is the small people that the Lord uses to overcome the massive obstacles that seem insurmountable.

Fifthly, God is a personal God. He's called each one of us into that role of that wonderful sermon that David Cook gave me so many years ago – that role that each of us have, of being 'salt and light' in our societies. And what we know about 'salt and light' is that salt is more effective, the more corrupt a society becomes; and the darker a society is, the brighter light shines. And that is our role. Our role in societies which appear to be becoming more and more corrupt, and dark, and devious are precisely the societies that we, as Christians, are called into.

Sixthly, and finally...that calling, for each one of us, comes with a promise. One of my favourite verses is found in Philippians 4. It says: "Rejoice! Don't be anxious about anything, bring your troubles to the Lord". And then a promise follows: it says that the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Let me tell you in

closing that, for all the chaos in Zimbabwe, Jenny and I and my family know that peace. It is a reality in our lives. It is a promise that we have found to be true; and it is a promise for each one of us here. Amen!