Dear Saints at St Columba's,

I have been on sabbatical over October and November 2022. Sabbatical is a time for reflection, study, and rest. In the UPCSA, it is offered every 5 years. I am grateful for the time off, and by way of accountability, I used the time to visit other churches, to write a book, and to finish my Master's course work.

I continued to be active on denominational platforms, and on occasion, came to our worship services. But other than that, I stepped back from pastoral ministry. I am grateful to those who assisted and supported me in my absence. To the members of the congregation and staff, thank you for allowing me to step back for this sabbatical.

My book is a collaboration with two colleagues, and will be launched in Johannesburg on 4th February. It is a 40-day theological reflection devotional on the five key interests of Prof Steve De Gruchy. Steve's father, Prof John De Gruchy, kindly produced the Foreward, and he will also be the keynote speaker at the book launch. Drawings of Steve were donated to the project by his mom, Isobel. It will be available from January.

Friends, the epistle of John says, "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."

This is the standard for following Christ: love not with mere words but with actions and in truth.

In the ancient church, the Greek letter 'X' was often used to denote 'Christ', from the word 'Xristos'. In our time, we've been told that "Xmas removes Christ from Christmas", but that is not the case. It was Christians who used an X for Christ. So do not be afraid of reclaiming this designation. Xmas is historically a Christian idea.

Also, Christians should stop saying "there's a war on Christmas." Christians need to exercise our faith in the face of a commercial hijacking of Xmas. The threat to Xmas isn't from atheists but from capitalists. My argument is thus: Xmas is a Christian celebration of Christ-present. This meaning has been taken over by the commercialisation of Xmas. The threat is not from beliefs but from values. Resist the temptation to make Xmas about buying gifts. Celebrate it with togetherness.

Christmas is a celebration of Christ-With-Us. The holy Family came together at the birth of Jesus. Xmas is an opportunity for us to come together as the family of faith.

It is also an opportunity for us to love with actions, not mere words, as John reminds us (above). St Columba's partnered with a local outreach program called Shoes4Souls that works with the homeless folk on the streets of Tshwane. They also have a mobile shower-truck where showers are available. They said:

To All at St Columba's Presbyterian Church, there never seems to be an appropriate way to start writing letters such as this. Words seem so empty and shallow [until we see] the Word in action. Thank you so much for the support you showed towards the Shoes4Souls

Homeless Christmas Box project. We are humbled and so encouraged by your support for those that society has cast aside. We are grateful for your contribution, and we were able to put 10 Christmas hampers together with your generous donation of R3000. It was such a blessing to be trusted and be able to pass on this blessing to precious souls. The morning we shared with the homeless folks, distributing the gifts was so special. One of the men we met with and were able to pray with, Karabo, has already reached out and has gone to seek help in being reconciled with his family and freedom from substance abuse. He has attended all his scheduled appointments with the social worker we put him in contact with.
He has already been assisted in getting an ID document, this is what opens the doors to him being recognised as a person and becomes an important building block in the walk to healing.

There we have it. Unfortunately, the delivery day took place when I was out of town, but we will partner with them again in serving Christ in the homeless. So the Benevolent Fund you have made generous donations to are being used to make a real difference in people's lives.

This is for me, the most effective witness to the love of Christ: it is the extent to which lives are changed by the Gospel: our lives, and the impact we make on others.
Don't just say you love Christ; show it by actions. Jesus would say, "anyone can do religious things; but can you do religious love?" For Jesus, this is the test.

I recently saw an advert by Justerini & Brooks company. They produce J&B. The ad shows what love in action – and acceptance of difference - really looks like. I kinda think how amazing if a church had produced an ad like this it would be a real witness, rather than sniping about 'keeping Christ in Christmas". This is what love and acceptance looks like. It's beautiful. I feel hopeful after watching it... celebrating the magic within us: https://youtu.be/LEshVJ1IECw

Saints, it's Christmas! Do love; do acceptance; do Christ, even 'to the least of these'… And be blessed in kind.

That reminds me of something I read.

"Life always answers in kind…

"When we chase, it retracts.
When we force & control, it resists.
When we let go, we're met with ease.
When we struggle, it provides misery.
When we're light & joyful, it smiles kindly upon us.
When we fear lack, Life's stingy.
When we're grateful & appreciative, we're showered with blessings.
When we want, we're left wanted.
When we love, we're loved in return.
Giving freely, it gives us more than we need.
When we hurry, time runs out - fast!
Slowing down, time expands to meet our pace...

Being present, we're blessed with grace and all that Life has to offer.

What experience are you creating in this moment..? ✨
How are you painting our future..? 🌍

It's all in your hands… or rather, in your state of mind. On the wider political front, pray for government; pray for the ANC conference starting Friday 16th – for many decisions impacting us citizens directly will be taken there. We have had 135 days of loadshedding this year. It is almost certainly affected by the factionalism in the party. Eskom has not only been captured, it has been weaponised for political outcomes. Let’s keep all these matters in prayer before our God.

God bless
Rev. Craig
14 December 2022