

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
“Politics and the Church – Acting Incarnationally”
Reflections of an Archbishop
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In January this year I addressed a consultation of South African church leaders, gathered to debate how we might face the challenges before us this year, which range from a general election through to longer term issues of social justice, poverty, health and development, as well as questions of morality, values and ethics in public and private life.

Challenged by this invitation to consider my own stance in facing these matters, I was reminded how Anglicanism is often described as, or perhaps that should be, accused of, having a particularly strong focus on the incarnation. I realised that it was indeed the case that, in the ten months since I moved to Bishopscourt and found myself at the centre of all manner of expectations about the role of the Archbishop of Cape Town (particularly in the public arena, following in the footsteps of my predecessors Desmond Tutu and Njongonkulu Ndungane), I have found that reflection on the incarnation has become a particular source of strength and encouragement.

By the grace of God, the seeds were sown at the very beginning of this new calling. As I worked on the Charge, the sermon I preached at my installation, I was praying that God would lead me not only to what the church needed to hear, but to what I also needed to hear at the start of this ministry. And so, in almost the opening paragraph, I spoke of the overarching need to ‘discover afresh what it is to be the body of Christ in our time, and who God is in Jesus Christ, for us here and now’.¹ I did not realise at the time how central these questions would become for me as I faced new responsibilities and challenges. I have also come to see how they can be a touchstone for the wider church wherever we find ourselves both called and sent to proclaim the gospel.

As we strive to answer these questions, our starting point must be that Jesus is, as we celebrate each Christmas, Emmanuel, God with us. God’s option is for humanity. He is with us, along side us, and, more than that, one of us – to a degree we probably will never fully understand this side of heaven. So, no matter what we face, God is with us. God is in the midst of this or that situation, among these and those people, desiring they find abundant life in him. Here in Southern Africa this might mean anyone and everyone from the politician ensnared by the temptations of power, to the child bringing up younger siblings following their parents’ death to HIV and AIDS. Nor are we, as Christians, ever alone, in our vocation to be the body of Christ, in all situations and among all people: Jesus is with us as we seek to meet others in their needs; and in reaching out to them, we should also expect to encounter him already present there.

Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth, between eternal ideals and the limitations of practical reality. Because he is, mysteriously yet compellingly, somehow simultaneously both fully divine and fully human, it is almost as if he does not so much bridge the gap as dissolve the gap within his

one being. Therefore, in Jesus we find God prepared to 'get stuck in', so to speak, rolling up his sleeves alongside us, ready to get his hands dirty.

This gives me confidence when I am faced with the complexity and messiness of life, where often all available choices have both positive and negative aspects; where we cannot assess all potential consequences of our actions; or where there is no obvious single right thing to say or do, but a nexus of interlocking options and possibilities, perhaps with Christians playing a variety of roles that are not immediately clearly and directly complimentary; and all these opening up further questions and further challenges. But, in Christ, in this incarnate Christ, I can risk getting my hands dirty too, and not feel obliged to seek out some impossibly perfectionist, purist, course of action that is, as some have described it, so heavenly minded that it is no earthly use. In this way, Jesus, present, incarnate, is, above all, the starting point of my engagement with the realities of life in South and Southern Africa.

Yet in all this I realise I am generally *not* asking myself 'What would Jesus do?' because I know I am not called to *be* Jesus. He alone is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, offering the gift of eternal life. It is rather that I ask, 'How can I, how can we, help people come into closer encounter with Jesus? How can we better help them hear the gospel, his good news?'

At the Lambeth Conference last year Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, put it this way: 'Every vocation in the Church of God is a calling to be a place where God's Son is revealed.'² He challenged us to consider where, in whom and in what circumstances, we had ourselves seen Jesus revealed, and how we recognised the Son of God revealed in these places, these people, these events and circumstances.

This is how we recognise Jesus, and believe others can be helped to recognise him too: *ubi caritas, Deus ibi est* says the Taizé chant, 'wherever there is love, there is God'. This poses us the question of who, then, are our neighbours and how we can reveal Christ by showing them love. How can residents of the leafy and luxurious suburb of Bishopsclough show tangible love in the impoverished townships of Mitchell's Plain, and vice versa? How can South Africans towards Zimbabweans? Who else is the neighbour God sends across my path, and how shall I, how shall we, love them?

Or put it another way. Jesus is the one who is present and revealed in the bringing of healing and wholeness to a broken world: good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, whatever form poverty, blindness or oppression take. (My predecessor, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, loved to refer to this passage from Luke 4 as the 'manifesto' of Jesus' ministry. I am tempted to wonder how the manifestoes of South Africa's political parties for this year's general election will measure up to it, and, more tellingly, whether their implementation of their commitments will be as faithful as his!)

Jesus brings judgement, true. Yet his judgement is not intended to condemn, but rather to show us what is awry in order to open our eyes to his better way. Our criticisms of all that mars and impedes humanity's flourishing as God intended should be equally constructive. For the God who so loved the world that he sent his Son so that all who believed in him should not perish but have eternal life, is the same God who did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (Jn 3:16,17).

So we recognise Jesus wherever the saving of the world is happening. And while we all are to be channels that reveal this saving, thank God, we are

nonetheless set free from any compulsion, any burdensome obligation, that we ourselves must save the world, and from a sense of our own condemnation if we fail in this task.

There is more. Jesus, God incarnate, is our ultimate model of what it is to be fully human. Human flourishing, which is to grow in Christlikeness not merely in some overly spiritualised way but also in the flesh and blood realities of the fullness of life, must be the goal to which all of politics, in its broadest sense, is directed – even if politicians may not recognise it in those terms. This is the so-called ‘common good’ that must take priority over personal advancement or party interests, and must govern all policy making. It is a matter of eternal values not so much being made concrete as being incarnated, finding human expression among those who are made in God’s image, enjoying the wonders of God’s creation, as God purposed for us.

Humanity’s context within God’s wider creation prompts me to one further area of reflection. This also draws from the Lambeth Conference, where the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain addressed us on the meaning of Covenant.³ I borrowed some of his wise words when I gave the Harold Wolpe lecture last November.⁴ In this I argued that we need to see the South African Constitution in terms of a covenant between South Africans for the healing of our nation, and for the flourishing of its people; and that equally we must reject its diminishment to a life based on contractual engagement, nothing more than financial exchange regulated by litigation. Looking at the credit-crunched world around, it seems that not only South Africa needs to hear the message that human living and the wellbeing of community and society can never be reduced to matters merely of currency and courts.

Sir Jonathan Sacks said that God’s covenant with Noah – the first, most basic, and most comprehensive commitment of God to all of human-kind – upholds three fundamental truths. The first is ‘the dignity of difference’. It is more than evident that we certainly need to affirm this strongly within South Africa, as we continue to build up our nation in the face of all the apartheid-fuelled division that previously marked our differences – the legacies of which fed into xenophobic violence against other Africans within our country. There is also a challenge here for the Anglican Communion. At the Lambeth Conference I was struck by the very great differences of context from which we all came, and wondered whether, even in areas where we were in apparent agreement with one another, whether we had fully appreciated the breadth of perspectives, cultures, challenges, that were represented among us, and how differently our superficially shared stances might find expression among our own people and parishes. This is the other side to the coin of failing to see where differences might be legitimate, being outworkings of truly shared foundations in greatly diverse circumstances.

The second is ‘the sanctity of life’. Questions around abortion spring to mind, through to the care of the elderly and even debate around euthanasia and assisted suicide. Within South Africa, it informs the churches’ engagement on policies for tackling high murder rates, and even access to treatment for HIV and AIDS and other life-threatening conditions. The third fundamental truth is ‘the integrity of creation’. As is increasingly clear, if we, globally, do not take care of our environment, we will all suffer.

God’s plan, God’s hope is for a world shaped by these three principles together – dignity of difference, sanctity of life, integrity of creation – and for this reason he sent his Son to save the world. These define the context, as it should

be, of human life, as it should be, which God in Christ assumed in his incarnation. So, wherever we find ourselves within God's world, within God's church, within the Anglican Communion, let these become our touchstones, as, individually and together, we seek afresh to discover what it is to be the body of Christ in our time, and who God is in Jesus Christ, for us here and now.

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¹ Archbishop Makgoba's Installation Charge is available at
<http://www.anglican churchsa.org/view.asp?ItemID=106&tname=tblComponent1&oname=News&pg=front>

² Archbishop Williams' Retreat Addresses are available at
<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1926>

³ The Chief Rabbi's Address is available at
<http://www.lambethconference.org/daily/news.cfm/2008/7/29/ACNS4484>

⁴ Archbishop Makgoba's Harold Wolpe Lecture, *Constitution and Covenant*, is available at
<http://archbishop.anglican churchsa.org/2008/11/harold-wolpe-memorial-lecture.html>