

Thursday, 17 August 2017

Archbishop's Charge to Cape Town Diocesan Synod

The text of the Archbishop's Charge to the 65th Session of the Synod of the Diocese of Cape Town, delivered during the opening Eucharist at St George's Cathedral:

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, dear friends, I greet you all in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and welcome you to the 65th Session of our Diocesan Synod. This year, the Synod Advisory Team advised me that in this Charge, rather than deliver a theological treatise or give the kind of administrative account of the affairs of the Diocese which is normally covered in a Charge, I should instead speak of the things that are in my heart. They told me that in my tenth year in Cape Town, and at my fourth Synod in this 169-year-old Diocese, you know more or less what I think and what I am capable of or not, and so – this is what they told me – we want to hear and feel what is in your heart. They even set up a Twitter account called “Tips for Thabo” to help me gauge the feelings in the Diocese.

But before I do that, I must acknowledge and give thanks for all of you who help me and the Diocese to do what we do and to be what we are: my family, Diocesan Chapter, Bishop Garth, the Dean, Charleen and all the Diocesan staff, the heads of our schools and homes, the clergy and their families, our legal advisors and all the other lay people who aid us. A special thanks to the Synod Advisory Team, to the Synod Manager, Fr Karl Groepe, and to all of you for supporting my ministry and praying for me and my family.

At this time in our Diocese's history, what is in my heart is ***Intentional Discipleship*** – which I am pleased that you will be able to go into in more depth in your small groups as you look at how discipleship serves mission and evangelism.

Hear God's Word, brought to us in Ezekiel, Chapter 34:

“I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.” (Ezekiel: 34:16)

In Psalm 24:

“The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.” (Psalm 24:1)

And in John's Gospel:

“I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” (John 16:33)

In the context of our theme, there are three questions that this Synod needs to be asking and wrestling with:

The **first** is: How do we address the needs of our youth, both inside and outside the “stained glass” of our churches?

The **second** is: How do we respond to the call, issued by the Communion and our Provincial Synod, and discussed at *Anglicans Ablaze*, for Intentional Discipleship?

And **finally**: How do we release God's money and other resources to help young people, both inside and outside the “stained glass”, to cope with the world outside the stained glass.

Combining these questions, we must ask: As recipients of generous gifts of property and people to the Church; how do we release the inherent potential these have for mission now and for at least the next 169 years? One of the possibilities we are exploring is adopting a different model of funding ministry, by using to better effect the properties which God has endowed the Diocese with to leverage development. Another exploration is happening in the arena of theological education.

About eight years ago, motivating the launch of the Archbishop's Theological Education Fund, I shared with Chapter a graph depicting how many senior clergy would be retiring a decade hence. This has begun to happen and we are losing many clergy of enormous experience and knowledge. Many of you will know that finding my particular vocation to the ministry 30 years ago was not a matter of me finding or choosing the Church. No, as I say in my soon-to-be-published book, *Faith and Courage*, the Church found me and moulded me for the tasks that I am doing. I brought nothing but was equipped by this church for ministry, beginning with my formation at the old St Paul's College. That is why theological education, not only that at the successor to St Paul's, the College of the Transfiguration, but in all the initiatives in this field, are particularly close to my heart.

It is why I have been involved in serious discussions with St Mellitus College in the UK to explore their model of education for parts of our own Province of Southern Africa. Only 10 years old, St Mellitus has four sites in England, partnerships with colleges in Malaysia and Haiti, 250 ordinands in training and 650 students taking its programmes. Its approach is similar to that of Duncan McLea's commendable initiative in our diocese, the St John's Leadership Academy, which is training people actively involved in mission and ministry rather than taking them out of a parish and sending them to a residential college. As I said to a group of vibrant young people both engaged in and training for ministry at the Academy recently: “We don't have an option but to do things differently... God is calling you to create the cracks. You will need courage. Do it in love. Do it beautifully. Do it confidently.” I have linked Father Duncan with the Dean of Studies and St Mellitus to work on a possible model, to be shared when it is ready with Chapter and the Diocese, and in the long term with the Province.

That is what is close to my heart – not theological education only for those to be ordained, but theological education for all the baptized. That too is the reason I launched the E-Reader project at Bishops court. We've had to acknowledge that I was too ambitious and we tried to do too much too quickly. But all the centres we aimed to establish are operational, albeit on lower than the anticipated level, and the roll-out of fibre-optic cable will improve its prospects. The aim is still to put a tablet computer in the hands of all lay ministers, clergy and theological students and to provide a significant library of theological literature for all to have access to.

It's sometimes said that we can't do church planting in the same way as other dioceses because we are an urban diocese. But I long to evangelise both inside and outside our stained glass. Every time I go to another diocese to bless a new church building, or a new school – and it happens encouragingly often across the Province – I feel deprived of experiencing the same joy and excitement in our own Diocese. Could we by next Diocesan Synod plant at least four new parishes? Perhaps we can engage our young people on ways in which to make them central to that, or some other equally exciting project?

Anglicans Ablaze says – and I endorse them – that we should expose, inspire, equip and encourage the young as participants to return to their communities and engage in holistic mission, evangelism, discipleship and service in the power of the Holy Spirit. I am always most encouraged by the contributions of young people – notably in initiatives such as Green Anglicans and HOPE Africa – to our Church; they provide welcome relief from the more unpleasant duties which assail me, such as facing the legal cases that come across my desk every week of my life and which challenge me to pray constantly for the grace and mercy needed to deal with them.

Moving to concerns in wider society which are close to my heart, I can identify with the Apostle Paul when he speaks of the whole of creation groaning as if experiencing labour pains. We groan inwardly over the suffering of our communities. I weep and cry in my prayers about the terrible spate of gender-based violence and the related killing of young children and girls which plagues our Diocese. We have attained political liberation, but women and children are being killed brutally and there is violence on our streets. Shamefully, scandalously, a Deputy Minister of this country who has openly admitted that he hit a woman in a nightclub remains in office. Is that the depth to which our public morality in South Africa has sunk? We see young people destroyed by drugs and alcohol, gangs hold our communities hostage and decay and corruption perpetuate the oppression of the poor and needy.

Beyond the Diocese, in South Africa we are living through a time of acute misery for very many of our people, a life where Government promises to the people of South Africa have been repeatedly broken and promises to their corrupt cohorts are kept daily. We are stuck in a rut which pits race against race, ethnic group against ethnic group, class against class, and prejudice against prejudice. There is an increasing tendency towards seeing people in terms of one dominant “identity”, imposing on us priorities which are arbitrarily determined by others, denying us the liberty to make our own decisions on where we choose to place our loyalties.

Despite attempts to criminalise “white monopoly capital” the more accurate picture of South Africa is that our culture has become one that accepts greed, fraud and pillaging of public resources as a “tribal” right. Corruption and looting have shown themselves to be multi-cultural and practised by people of every race. The current generation of leaders are trying their best to undermine a democracy and infect the entire South African ecosystem with their form of corruptive cancer. And while public plundering takes place, most of the middle and upper classes become indifferent to what is happening, so as not to threaten their piece of the proverbial pie.

Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, warns us that “opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference... The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference between life and death.” The Dalai Lama adds: “To remain indifferent to the challenges we face is indefensible. If the goal is noble, whether or not it is realized within our lifetime is largely irrelevant. What we must do therefore is to strive and persevere and never give up.”

Turning to our own scriptures, the Bible tells us that God is a God of justice and righteousness, a God of mercy and truth. The sons and daughters of God are those who desire to see justice and righteousness. They are men and women who will stand for truth. They are men and women who will stand boldly and allow themselves to be guided by their conscience, led by the truth of the word of God. Pain and suffering produce the character that is required in order to set creation free from bondage. As Paul says, the suffering we experience cannot be compared to the glory that will be revealed in us.

South Africa is more than a country... it's an idea. We have always envisioned that we are a nation which embraces diversity, encourages inclusion and seeks a more just and human world. South Africa is not broken. Our freedom of the press, universal free education, and independent judiciary are all indicators of a potentially healthy country. However there is not equality of opportunity. There is not equality of service delivery, health care, clean water, sanitation and education.

During a time when Chinua Achebe's words “that things fall apart” ring poignantly, God tonight providentially brings us the words of Joshua. Joshua who, in a time of crisis, at the moment of choice, refused to return to Egypt; Joshua who refused to return to or dignify that place so marked in the experience of God's people as a place of unprincipled politics, a place polluted by the physical landscape and spiritual spaces alike. Centuries later the Ghanaian writer, Ayi Kwei Armah, would echo that same sentiment as he looked back at a legacy of betrayal:

“How horribly rapid everything has been from the days when men were not ashamed to talk of souls and of suffering and of hope, to these low days of smiles that will never again be sly enough to hide the knowledge of betrayal and deceit. There is something of an irresistible horror in such quick decay.”

Even as others urged him to settle for compromise and the illusion of peace, Joshua understood, as indeed Martin Luther understood in the lead up to Reformation, that “Here I stand; I can do no other.” He understood the power of speaking out against injustice and tyranny, of speaking truth to power, as did the hymn writer James Russell Lowell who, protesting against America's war against Mexico, out of profoundly spiritual and political anguish, left us these hauntingly beautiful words:

“Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side.”

Joshua understood, and the challenge is clear to us, that there comes a moment when integrity demanded that he could no longer be a part of that world of decay and betrayal. Joshua saw beyond the great barriers to the Promised Land of Canaan.

He saw giants it is true, but he also saw a land overflowing with good things, a land filled with milk and honey. He saw the possibilities of enough to sustain everyone. He saw, to use the celebrated phrase that the arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice. That was his vision for his ministry; that was the purpose of his leadership, that there would be enough for all and that it was only failure to take bold steps forward that stood in the way of a better life for all.

It is of course Martin Luther King Junior, who is best remembered for those inspiring words about the arc of the universe being long but indeed stretching towards justice. Those words were actually rooted in a much earlier reflection, in the thinking of Theodore Parker the abolitionist, and emerged from the cauldron of inhuman slavery as the American Civil War loomed. He wrote:

“We cannot understand the moral Universe. The arc is a long one, and our eyes reach but a little way; we cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; but we can divine it by conscience, and we surely know that it bends toward justice. Justice will not fail, though wickedness appears strong, and has on its side the armies and thrones of power, the riches and the glory of the world, and though poor men crouch down in despair. Justice will not fail and perish out from the world of men, nor will what is really wrong and contrary to God’s real law of justice continually endure.”

Joshua discerned a deep need in the cry of those who yearned to be free, of those growing dispirited in the desert, for the gift of hope. The South African theologian Ernst Conradie has said that “Christian hope is a protest statement, a form of resistance and defiance instigated by an unacceptable present.” Albert Nolan reminds us that theology and spirituality in fidelity to the sources insist that transforming hope can only be located in the places of suffering.

From KwaZulu-Natal, Palm and Le Bruyns assert in the Journal of Theology for Southern Africa that “those who follow this God can embody the divine vision by seeing otherwise and imagining differently in the places of suffering in our world,” and “a vision sensitive to those who suffer in the present as Jesus did in the past is indeed the place where hope for an alternative reality can emerge.”

My generation grew up politically with the insights Paolo Freire who writes challengingly: “The idea that hope alone will transform the world and action undertaken in that kind of naiveté is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism and fatalism but the attempt to do without hope in the struggle to improve the world – as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone or a purely scientific approach – is a frivolous illusion... Just to hope is to hope in vain. My hope is necessary but not enough. Alone it does not win. But without it my struggle will be weak and wobbly... we need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water.”

One of our greatest needs in South Africa is the need to rekindle the lamps of hope, to take courage from battles won and victories gained. Joshua 4 records, that when Joshua led the people across the Jordan, he placed 12 stones from the wilderness side of the river in the midst of the riverbed. And after the people had arrived in the Promised Land, the first thing Joshua did was to build a memorial with the 12 stones that had been in the riverbed. From then on, all God's people could look at the

memorial pillar and say: This is where we crossed the Jordan! This is where we parted company with betrayal and disappointments and began to live with a spirit of victory. This is the place and the hour when we found hope, a hope that had been deferred and withheld from us. This is where we said that we will no longer allow anyone to rob us of our birthright, of the fruits of the battles we fought against powers and principalities.

We face a *kairos* moment yet again in South Africa. We must re-create the clarity of thought and vastness of hope that allowed the previous *kairos* moment to be such a powerful force for ushering in a new day. Our task as ministers of the Gospel, as the heralds of Good News, is like God's people to remember what God has done for us and to consciously allow God's great deeds in the past to continue to empower us. We must rekindle our own hope and the hope of the people of this land and the countries of our region.

We too have to echo Martin Luther's words: "Here we stand we can do no other."

God bless you, your families, this Diocese, Province and South Africa. **Amen**