

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Sermon at Eucharist
Launch of Diocesan Development Programme
Diocese of Lebombo, 27 January 2009

Readings of the day:

Heb 10:1-10 – God desires of us, as of Jesus, not sacrifices, but to do his will

Ps 40:1-13 - I waited patiently; the Lord heard, set me on a rock, gave me a new song

Mk 4:1-9 – the parable of the sower

(If an OT lesson is required, Jonah 2 has been suggested.)

(Also the feast of St John Chrysostom)

May I speak in the name of God, who sows the seed of life in abundance.

Dear Bishop Dinis, dear people of the Diocese of Lebombo, it is such a joy to be with you, as we launch the Diocesan Development Programme.

Today is the feast of St John Chrysostom, the Bishop of Constantinople at the end of the fourth century. Chrysostom, is actually a nickname, 'golden-tongue', because he was such a wonderful preacher.

I do not aspire to be in the same league as him. But I am happy to adopt his words to his own people. He said:

'I cannot let a day pass without feeding you with the treasures of the Scriptures.'

Today the Lord has certainly set before us treasures of the Scriptures from which we can be fed!

Let me begin with our Psalm: 'I waited patiently for the Lord, and he inclined to me and heard my cry.'

'Patience' is the first lesson we have here. This is not the patience of resignation, of giving up, of passive helplessness. No! It is the patience of hope and confidence – the hope and confidence we have today as we establish the office for Social Development.

We have such confidence and hope because we have a Lord who inclines to us, who leans down like a parent to catch the tiny whispering cry of his child.

When my children were little, when they felt sad, unwell, they would speak in such a small, quiet voice. And I am such a tall Daddy, I had to bend down really, really, low, to incline my ear, and catch what they were saying.

No matter how small we feel, how insignificant we are, afraid we might be, God inclines his ear, and he hears us.

This is our God, says the Psalmist, and he brings us out of our troubles, out of the roaring waters – well, this Diocese knows more than enough about floods and roaring waters.

He brings us out of our troubles, and sets us on a firm rock. And then he puts a song of thanksgiving in our mouths.

Perhaps you want to say ‘Hold on, Archbishop! You are going too fast, you are going too far! I feel I’m still in the pit, still among the roaring waters, still struggling in mire and clay. My life is hard, full of difficulties, pains and sorrows. The war killed my soul and physically scarred me. I don’t feel that I’ve been rescued, and given a firm foothold. Not yet. So how can I join in your song of thanksgiving?’

Well, my answer would be: ‘Think of Jonah!’ I am sure you remember the story of Jonah. When God called him to be a prophet, he tried to run away, and he ended up being swallowed by a whale – or, perhaps, some very big fish.

Now, while he was in the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed. He did not say ‘Lord, I’m sorry! Help me!’ He did not say, ‘Lord, where are you? Get me out of here?’ He began his prayer like this:

‘I called to the Lord in my distress, and he answered me!’

And he says this even while he is still inside the fish!

He goes on to say, ‘You brought up my life from the pit’ – but actually he is still inside the fish.

And he ends the prayer saying ‘With the voice of thanksgiving, I will sacrifice to you ... Deliverance belongs to the Lord’ – and STILL he is inside the fish!

Jonah knows God. And so he prays with confidence, knowing he will be heard even as he opens his lips; knowing that his answer is as good as guaranteed!

Of course, it may not be the answer we want – the whale spews Jonah out, but he still had to go and become a prophet! But he knew he could trust in God.

And so do we. We put our trust, our patient hope, in God, and believe we will be answered. As we read in today's Psalm, 'Blessed is the man – blessed is the woman – who has made the Lord their hope.'

However, this is not all about waiting for God to act. God expects us to play our part as well! We must also make the effort! This is the second theme of my sermon.

If we look carefully we will find this message within our gospel reading – the parable of the sower.

Jesus is the sower, he sows the seed. And his hope is that the seed will fall on fertile ground, and grow and flourish and bear a rich harvest.

Today, we believe a seed is being planted – a seed that will grow and flourish and bear a rich harvest.

What does the seed need to grow? Sunshine, water, and good soil, at the very least – and close attention and hard work, on the part of the farmer.

Well, sunshine – here, we need the sunshine of God's love. We know that God wants to shine the sunshine of his love on us – but that means we need to put ourselves in a place where the sun can shine on us.

The secret of this is prayer – it is prayer that ensures the sunshine of God's love falls where it is needed. So, first of all, I call on everyone here today to pray for this new initiative.

And don't only pray today – keep on praying. Whenever you think of this office, or these people, or the work they do, or the needs they try to meet, then say a prayer for them. Don't only think of them – ask God to bless them.

Second, we need water – liquid resources – I'm thinking of money here! Sometimes, like the rain, it just comes to us. Sometimes we need to fetch it from somewhere else; and sometimes we have to find it, through digging wells.

In the same way, we may find that there are resources on which we can draw nearby – we just have to go to where they are. Perhaps there are people, organisations, within the church, or with which the church has links. They just need to be approached – just as we need to take our buckets to the river.

Or perhaps we have to try harder – digging patiently and determinedly in different places, until the water gushes up. Sometimes finding resources and support for our project work feels rather like that. But remember what the Psalmist says – be patient, do not give up!

Then we have the soil – that needs to be dug and turned and prepared, and fertilized, and kept in good condition. Whatever time of year, there is always something for farmers to be doing, just to ensure that the soil is good, the plants are growing, the weeds are dealt with, the bugs are kept away.

So too in the life of any organisation, there is a lot of daily hard work to be done. Some is very routine – administration and paperwork. Some is like the joy of harvest, when plans and projects bear fruit, and a real difference is made.

And, just as in farming, sometimes teamwork is the best way to get all the jobs done.

This, I believe, is one of the great strengths of what we are doing here today. We are bringing together all the work that is being done on HIV and AIDS; and the work on Malaria; and the gardening projects; and all the other activities of the Diocese in the area of Social Development.

And so, my prayer and hope is that from today you will enjoy the benefits that come from cooperation and coordination and integration –

- that you will find you can act in complimentary ways;

- that one project has aspects that can strengthen another;
- that doing things together can be easier than doing them separately;
- that you can bring encouragement to each other;
- that in the spaces and links between you, you will find new opportunities;
- that together you will have a louder voice in the Diocese and in the communities around, and beyond, i.e. including your suffering neighbours in Zimbabwe.

Dear people of Lebombo, dear staff and supporters of the Diocesan Development Programme, I am so glad that we are holding today's celebration within the Eucharist – for as we break bread together, we shall remind one another: 'We who are many, are one body'.

This is what we declare today in the reshaping of the Diocesan Social Development work: we are many – many needs, many activities, many programmes – but we are also one, one in the body of Christ; and we are one in the power of his Spirit, as we are sent as living sacrifices to share his love with his world.

May God bless this Programme richly, and through it, may he bring rich blessings to many, many more of his children.

Amen