

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
International Reference Group Meeting
WCC: Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa
26 May 2008

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is a great joy to be with you today. Thank you for your invitation.

My task is to provide a “spiritual reflection” to offer a context as you begin your meeting.

So may I speak in the name of the One God, Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life

Let me begin my reflection by reading St Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians. I am reading from the Contemporary English Version, which conveys the passage with particular clarity.

Ephesians 1:15-20

I have heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people. So I never stop being grateful for you, as I mention you in my prayers. I ask the glorious Father and God of our Lord Jesus Christ to give you his Spirit. The Spirit will make you wise and let you understand what it means to know God. My prayer is that light will flood your heart and that you will understand the hope that was given to you when God chose you. Then you will discover the glorious blessings that will be yours together with all God’s people.

I want you to know about the great and mighty power that God has for us followers. It is the same wonderful power he used when he raised Christ from death and let him sit at his right hand in heaven.

I used this reading a fortnight ago at a candlelight service for those living with HIV and AIDS, and was struck by how powerfully its message communicated God’s good news.

St Paul had begun his letter by speaking about how God has chosen us, adopted us, lavished love on us, and marked us with his seal, the Holy Spirit, the promise of our redemption.

Now, in this passage, he prays for the Ephesians in ways that pick up these themes. In so doing he shows that his desire is to further God’s work among them.

Our attitude must also be one of delighting only to do the will of God, so that the good news of the kingdom of Jesus Christ may come more fully in the lives of others. Like St Paul, we walk in the footsteps of the servant king, and we come to serve and not to be served.

And therefore like St Paul, we must pray.

We must pray because, 'unless the Lord build the house, the labourers work in vain' (Psalm 127:1). It is no good us deciding how we think God ought to be served. We have to incorporate in all our planning and project development the time to pray; and to pray the sort of prayer that is about waiting on the Lord and listening for his directing. We bring before him all the professional abilities and knowledge and resources that we can muster – but we lay them before him, and ask him to shape and direct us in their use.

And, while I mention resources, let me add a challenge. My guess is that many of you have flown to be here. How are you offsetting the cost to the environment of your travel? How are you being good stewards of the resources not only of the World Council, but of God's world that he entrusts to us?

Let me return to St Paul. Like him, we must also pray for those we serve – and they must know that we pray for them. The knowledge that one is being prayed for is amazingly powerful. Even if individuals feel unable themselves to be 'in touch' with God, if they are in touch with someone who is in touch with God on their behalf, then they KNOW they have some connection that reaches to heaven!

The knowledge that they are being prayed for also affirms the opening of St Paul's prayer: you matter, to me and you matter to God – you are important enough for me to spend time praying to God for you!

St Paul says, I never stop being grateful for you and praying for you.

He does not pray about them because they are a problem – he prays because he is grateful for them. This is also an important message to communicate.

Then we have the first great theme of the prayer. St Paul asks that God will give them his Spirit, so they may understand what it means to know God, to know his light flooding their hearts, to know the hope that has been theirs since God chose them.

What people most of all need to know – in their heads, but even more so in their hearts and souls – is that God cares about them and they are his. God loves everyone – and nothing, nothing at all, absolutely nothing, and especially not a tiny virus, can separate us from his love!

Unfortunately the Churches have often been very poor in conveying the message that God loves and accepts all those who turn to him, that he welcomes them, and cares for them, and considers them special, precious, beloved.

We may say the words, but our actions betray us.

It is still the case that, for many HIV+ve people, the last place they would seek help and support is from the church.

Even now, I know of churches that imply that AIDS is God's punishment; or that people who are HIV+ve are somehow unclean; guilty of the worst sort of sinfulness; 'not good enough' to be properly church members; and second-class citizens in the household of God.

For too long we have contributed to the stigmatisation that so much fuels the spread of this epidemic on our continent. It fuels the reluctance of people to be tested and treated – and this further adds to infection rates.

We know that the churches throughout history and across the world are not very good about talking openly and honestly – and redemptively – on questions of gender and sexuality and sexual desire and sexual behaviour.

Yet it is so fundamental to our God-given human nature, and the Bible is full of sexual imagery, not least describing the Church as the bride of Christ. We have plenty of positive resources to draw on!

Of course, on this continent we have the added cultural complications that make it a real mine field – but let us be open about this, and talk about the challenges honestly within our churches, and from our pulpits!

We know the tensions of authentically inculturating the gospel within our own societies, and untangling ourselves from colonialist baggage. But this does not mean that everything that is quote African unquote is automatically and unquestionably right.

The gospel must critique all cultures. In our own cultures there are all sorts of practices that are less than God's best for human beings.

So we cannot endorse traditional attitudes and practices that, directly or implicitly, imply the second class status of women. This is wrong, not because it leads to the inability of women and girls to negotiate safe sex on equal terms, and is a major factor in the spread of AIDS – though it does.

But it is wrong because Scripture teaches that men and women together are made in the image of God, and each have equal status in his eyes.

Furthermore, all that St Paul tells the Ephesians about submission is to be understood within the context of the first verse of the passage: everyone must submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

There is far more to be said than I have time for this morning – but we need to do more work on our Biblical theology.

I say Biblical theology deliberately, because the patriarchal attitudes within Scripture which reinforce and are reinforced by patriarchal attitudes within society must be overcome using the resources – and there are many – within the pages of the Bible.

We cannot use what might be called quote Western liberal unquote arguments, because they will not stick.

We must, rather, speak about Deborah, who held political, religious and military leadership over all Israel some three thousand years ago; or about the way that Jesus accords women a status way ahead of the surrounding culture, sharing with them the task of spreading his kingdom in all manner of subversive ways.

Why is it now that the Church is behind surrounding culture, rather than ahead of culture, in how we treat women?

In the same way, we cannot endorse traditional initiation ceremonies into adulthood that involve unsafe sexual practices – or any sort of pressure on young people to initiate or accede to sexual acts outside permanent monogamous mutually respectful relationship.

We have to break some of our societies' taboos. Africa's own leaders must take the risk of speaking out. We must help our people to be confident critics of our own cultures, so they can learn to identify affirm all that is good within them without also being required to endorse what is harmful and diminishes the image of God in any of his children.

So the churches have a major challenge, to get beyond the sort of embarrassment that seems almost inevitably to link sex with sin and guilt and punishment. We must learn to speak confidently about sex, and to make what we say relevant to our own cultures

Churches also need to ask ourselves how we can help answer the serious questions raised, for example, by the recent Harvard Study.

This said that the strategies into which we have all been putting so much effort and resources are not working – abstinence and monogamy, condom use, HIV testing, and treatment of sexually transmitted infections. Why is this so?

They suggest we should concentrate on male circumcision, and reducing the numbers of sexual partners – since typically HIV spreads through those who have several long term simultaneous partnerships without the commitment of marriage – a practice by men which many cultures endorse.

How can the church address the latter effectively?

I think part of the answer lies in our ability better to make the links between faith, culture and sexual behaviour.

How can we teach ‘no sex outside marriage’ and then behave as if all the people in our pews follow this teaching 100%, even when everyone knows that large numbers of them do not! This is no practical help at all!

We have to challenge ourselves to do better, and work in ways that will make a difference.

This is not easy!

However, our immediate answer lies in the second part of St Paul’s prayer. It is a message for us, just as much as it was a message for those at the HIV and AIDS candlelight service a fortnight ago.

St Paul wants us to know – in head and heart and soul, in the reality of our experience – that the great and mighty power that raised Christ from the dead is for us, the body of Christ, and all its members.

Those who struggle with the consequences of themselves being infected or affected by HIV and AIDS, need to know that the power of the God who loves them, is there for them – to help them in all the challenges they face.

We too, who struggle with the consequences of so many being infected and affected by HIV and AIDS, need to know equally that the power of God who loves us, and loves those we seek to serve, is there for us, and will help us in the challenges we face.

God desires to help us – especially if we begin as St Paul began – with prayer – and let him direct our ways.

For if God is for us, who can be against us?

May he bless you in all your deliberations in the days ahead, and make you a blessing to others.

Amen