

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Community Chest 80th Anniversary
‘Inter-Faith Service’
St George’s Cathedral – 11 September 2008

Reading: 1 Thess 4:9-12

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Community Chest of the Western Cape, it is a great privilege to be with you today, and join in celebrating your 80th anniversary.

Yours is a remarkable achievement, and I am glad to have this opportunity to pay tribute to one of the country’s oldest, and most impressive, philanthropic organisations.

I am also glad that it is an organisation which has longstanding and close links with the Anglican Church, especially in your early years – not least through Bishop Lavis, who was your longest-serving Chairman.

Therefore it is a particular pleasure to me, to continue that link, and be able to share in your celebrations today.

There was once a city ...

Let me tell you about a certain city: a coastal city, endowed with a fine natural harbour; a city sited on major trading routes, and serving an extensive hinterland; a prosperous city – a provincial capital, indeed; a city with international connections, and a religiously mixed population.

Within that city, imagine a group of people, from different backgrounds, who have come together in a common cause.

Together they have become known for their faithfulness and love – love in action, particularly shown to those in need, not only within their own city, but from a wide surrounding area.

And so a message comes to them. It is a message of affirmation, and of encouragement.

First, it is an affirmation of what they stand for. It commends the way they uphold the goal of human flourishing, and of the moral and ethical standards and practices that promote such flourishing; not least through cooperation and

mutual support of one another, as a means of best encouraging and strengthening the support they can then provide to those in particular need.

Second, it is also a message of encouragement – because it is not always easy to hold fast to what is right. As the message acknowledges, emerging political and social circumstances, to say nothing of economic constraints, can make it hard to hold fast to such high aspirations, and to maintain the remarkable record established so far.

Yet it is clear that such goals are worthy goals – and should be sustained and furthered, no matter what.

From Thessalonica to Cape Town

Now, before I go too far, I had better admit that in all I have said so far, I have been speaking not about the city of Cape Town, but about the city of Thessalonica, on the Greek coast, as it was the best part of two thousand years ago.

The passage that we heard read from the New Testament of the Christian Bible was written by St Paul, about the year 51AD. It comes from what we know St Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

As you will have gathered, they were residents in a city that had much in common with our own, in terms of its physical situation and its prosperity.

They were a small group, from various backgrounds, who had embraced the Christian faith when St Paul had visited their city, probably only a couple of years before he wrote his letter.

They had certainly not been around as long as 80 years, at least, not by that point; though of course the Christian community continues there to this day!

But in a short time they had made a great impact, and set a significant example to other churches.

They had become well known for the strength of their faith – and for the way their faith found expression in their actions.

The passage we heard read contained these words:

‘You yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia.’

It is clear from the rest of the letter that this love was not only a matter of words, but was manifested in acts of material generosity to Christian communities across the whole of the Province of Macedonia.

In drawing a parallel with St Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, my message is this – you should also draw affirmation and encouragement from His words.

What he commended then is still to be commended today.

A message for today?

That said, in some ways our circumstances are markedly different from those the Thessalonian Christians faced.

St Paul directs them to live quietly and to mind their own affairs – for in this way they will be able to continue in what they are doing.

But, unlike the Thessalonians, we do not face a potentially hostile Roman Empire!

We are blessed to live in a constitutional democracy.

This gives us opportunities and responsibilities that those two thousand years ago never knew.

Chief among these is the ability to act and speak more widely for the alleviation of poverty – not only tackling its effects, but confronting its causes.

I am reminded of the words of the Brazilian priest Helder Camera, who famously said:

‘When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.’

Perhaps the risk here today is of being called a counter-revolutionary!!

In our young democracy, the space for and role of civil society remains fluid – and it is up to us who constitute civil society, not least faith communities, philanthropists, and NGOs, to ensure that we maximise the scope available to us to be constructive contributors to the shaping and developing of our society.

Within the wider political culture that we are attempting to nurture, it must be understood by all that there is a vital function to be performed by civil society – that of a critical friend to the other organs of national life – including both government and private sector.

‘Critical friend’ is an important concept – we are friends, we are on the side of all those who serve the best interests of this country, and we are on the side of a strong constitutional democracy as a means of building up the life of our nation.

But we must also be critical, in the best possible sense of the word. For hard truths are often best heard from those who are friends. It is our job to speak as friends; and not to be shy of telling the truths of our communities, nor the truths of our perspectives and our priorities – which are of necessity, and by definition, different from the perspectives and priorities of those who govern and hold power.

Mature democracy understands the place of civil society and such critical friends, just as it understands the place of a loyal opposition – the friendship, the loyalty, are what provides the constructive context for engagement with one another.

None of us has the whole picture. We all need each other in order to bring out a greater, fuller, understanding – the vital, comprehensive, understanding that can then be reflected in policies that better address the needs of all.

So, unlike the Thessalonians, we are not required to live quietly and mind our own affairs.

We should be ready to be outspoken, and to take our full and rightful place within public debate and policy making.

So I encourage you all, to grasp the opportunities you have to address the causes of poverty and the means by which these might be alleviated.

Keep on pressing for best possible practices, for transparency, openness, consultation, and communication on the part of government, business, civil society, and with all with whom you deal.

And of course it goes without saying – but I will say it anyway – that we must reject all forms of corruption, inefficiency, carelessness, and lack of interest or commitment, on the part of those whose responsibility it is to make and deliver effective policies, effective programmes, effective services, wherever they are needed.

I know that what I am saying reflects your own objectives, as carried on your website. There you speak, for example, of encouraging and fostering the maintenance of high standards in human service delivery.

Yet these are priorities of which it is good to remind ourselves from time to time – especially when, as today, the full and free operation of every organ of society, and the functioning of robust and honest debate, seem open to question.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters of the Community Chest. Thank you once again for all you have done, and for all you are doing.

Thank you for the more than one hundred and thirty million rand (R130 million) you have invested in the social development sector in the last decade.

Thank you for the more than twenty million rand (R20 million) you are disbursing through over five hundred (500) welfare and development organisations this year alone.

Thank you for your commitment to sound business practices, good governance, and sustainable initiatives.

Thank you for your faithfulness, and for your love for others.

Let me end with some more words from St Paul, this time from his second letter to the church at Thessalonica

'Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who love us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts, and strengthen them in every good work and word.' (2 Thess 2:15,17)

May he strengthen you also, in every good work and word.

Amen.