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St Cyprian's School Evensong

St George's Cathedral – 25 September 2008

Readings: Acts 19:21-40; Lk 4:14-30

May I speak in the name of the One God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of us all.

Dear friends from St Cyprians – Head of School, staff, learners, parents and guardians, members of Council, Old Girls, and friends of the school – I bring you greetings from Archbishop Thabo, who, as you know, has been called to Tuinhuis this afternoon for the swearing in of our new President. Thank you for allowing me to be part of today's service in his place, as you mark another year in the life of St Cyprians.

As Heritage Day yesterday reminded us, it is important from time to time to take stock of our past, of where we have come from, and of how we have arrived at where we are now, in order to direct our way forward. This is my theme today.

Yours is a school that is rooted in Anglican tradition – in the tradition of Christianity, of Jesus Christ himself. And it opens its doors to those of Christian and many other traditions. Whatever our own background, the challenge to every person – in every time and place – is to learn to draw on the best of our traditions, the fullness of our heritage, in order to go forward, and keep on growing as flourishing individuals, contributing to a flourishing community, a flourishing nation.

Our second reading (which, like the first, is one of those set in the lectionary for today), from St Luke's gospel, is very much about drawing on the past, on tradition and heritage, to go forward into the future. Here we have an account of Jesus, at the very beginning of his ministry. He has been baptised by John the Baptist, and heard the voice of God affirm 'You are my Son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.' Then he has faced the temptations in the wilderness, and rejected the attractions of basing his life on the pursuit of possessions, or power, or popularity as a show-off miracle worker. No, he is going to base his life on a much firmer foundation.

And so we have heard how he comes to the synagogue in his home town, and reads from the holy scriptures of his own heritage and tradition – the book of the prophet Isaiah. You might say that the words he reads form his mission statement, for the years ahead of him. They sum up what he believes his life is all about. Let me read some of them again:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me

Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free...

First and foremost, Jesus says that it is God's Spirit upon him, that calls him and enables him to do all this. This is the foundation of all that he will do from now on. Whether or not we are Christians, there is a challenge to us all in these words. The challenge is to get our foundations right; to build on whatever in our tradition is the source of all that is good, all that is best, that is creative and constructive, and is life-giving – dare I say it, all that is holy.

Choosing the foundations of life is the most important choice you will ever make.

As our first reading was about St Paul encountering the makers of shrines to the goddess Artemis in Ephesus. Well, no one worships Artemis today – but there are an awful lot of equally false gods around, and we need to beware of them, and avoid them.

The temptations that Jesus faced are still very seductive – to be popular, to put money and possessions and status at the top of our wish list. But these are not what really matters. They will not, on their own, make you happy, or give you a life of deep satisfaction. So don't get sucked into pursuing them, and not caring whether you do so through means that are less than good – even means that are rooted in evil. Some examples - drug dealing makes money through destroying people. That is evil. Corruption, even in little ways, drains millions, billions, of rand from our economy that could be used for poverty alleviation. And even temptations to dabble in the little excitements of evil – such as so-called Satanist pop-music, and occult games – this is playing with fire, and you will get burnt.

Dear friends, don't choose bad foundations, they will bring your life to ruin. You deserve the very best; and God wants the very best for you. Choose good foundations – and then you will be able to build and grow and flourish. This is what God wants for all of us – to flourish, as people, in our personal qualities, as well as in our academic and other achievements. I think I read something very similar in the school's objectives on its website!

Christian teaching tells us that God will send his Spirit to help us flourish, and to encourage us through all our lives, if we choose to build on his foundation. What does building on this foundation mean?

It means, as Jesus said, to bring 'good news' to the poor. This is not only for the financially poor, though it is this. It is for every sort of poverty – emotional, intellectual, physical. He promises good news to anyone whose life has been diminished and held back unfairly, in any way.

He also calls us to proclaim freedom to the oppressed – no matter what sort of oppression limits people, and prevents them from growing and flourishing as God

desires. Blindness also comes in different ways – one meaning is an inability to ‘see what is good for us’ – we need to be helped to see with God’s eyes, God’s eyes of love.

So our reading tells how Jesus firsts set out the broad principles, that he draws from his heritage – working for good news for all, no more poverty, oppression, blindness.

Then, if we read on in St Luke’s gospel, we find that for the rest of his life, Jesus works to make these principles find concrete expression in the circumstances of the people he meets.

In many ways that is what your community partnership and Round Square programmes teach. From the website I see that St Cyprians wants to produce confident, competent, caring young women. And the programmes help you to find ways of showing this principle of care in specific ways – ways that reflect Jesus’ own principles. For example, helping disabled children ride gives them a new physical freedom. Playing with abandoned babies enriches what might otherwise be their emotional poverty.

And as you go on from school, you will find you can draw on this heritage, the foundations of this tradition, with its principles of care, of good news for all, in all manner of new ways.

The choices we make about our lives will not only affect ourselves, but those around us, and even our environment, our planet. We can live greedily, or we can live generously, and help build a generous society. You can choose to become contributing members of community, as St Cyprians prepares you to be, and as so many have become – not least through the Union of Old Girls. You can be the ‘future leaders’ St Cyprians aims to create – leaders for good. With the ‘creating future leaders’ project, new buildings, and other developments in the pipeline, it certainly is a very exciting time in the life of St Cyprians. Thank you, Mrs Redlinghys, for the fresh new energy and direction you have brought!

Drawing on the best of our heritage, for going forward into the future, is a challenge South Africa is facing at the political level too. We are wrestling to build on the heritage, the vision, of democracy, that came as the result of such struggle, 14 years ago. This has been a turbulent week – we know that politics can be a rough business, even within the structures of democracy. So we should not be too alarmed by all that has happened. Let me say that before I was a priest and came to South Africa, I was a British Diplomat, working in the Foreign Office at the time the Conservative Party removed Mrs Thatcher from 10 Downing Street – and I can tell you, it was far more drawn out and brutal politicking than what has happened here! But was British democracy threatened in any way? Not in the slightest!

That said, on Heritage Day, we so often hear politicians call for us to live out the values of ubuntu – and the Archbishop says he should like to see them do this themselves, to a rather greater extent within the political sphere! Certainly, there

should be no place for vindictive actions or vicious language. Instead, those who aspire to high office should remember they are shouldering weighty responsibilities. They are not there to be self-serving, but to serve the country and its people, especially those in most need. And such serving means they are there to make sure that service delivery happens. At least there has been acknowledgement that they need to do better with service delivery – the vision of a new democracy, and a new and flourishing life for all must not be lost. This is the heritage to which we all need to hold fast

In a democracy we all have a voice, and all adults have a vote – and we can use our voice, our vote, to call politicians to live out the vision of democracy we have inherited. Of course, whether politicians or anyone else, none of us get it right all the time.

When this happens, do not be discouraged. God's promise is always to help us find our way forward. As for how we can do this, it is important to learn from St Cyprian himself, who had important things to say about the times when we stray away from doing the right thing, or lose touch with our good foundations.

He said to those who had veered from the path of Christianity, under pressure from persecution, that one cannot just say 'there, there, it doesn't matter.' He wanted people to take the time to reflect, and take the time to learn from their mistakes, their weaknesses; and then to show that they were committed to doing better. But all the time, the door was open for them to return.

This reflects how God's arms of love are similarly always open for us to return to him, and to find in him the courage to pick ourselves up, to make a fresh start, to get back on the right path, and to set off, going forwards once again.

So remember this. And do not be afraid of aiming for the best, for excellence; do not be afraid to risk making mistakes along the way; but always be ready to learn from the ups and downs of life. Take time, now and again, regularly to reflect on the very best of your heritage, your tradition, and build your life on that.

And may God bless you, and help you to flourish.

Amen