

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Funeral of Bishop David Beetge**  
**St Dunstan's College**  
**3 October 2008**

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Readings:

Is 53:8-10 (from the suffering servant passages)

Rpm 8:31-38 (What are we to say? ... Nothing can separate us from the love of God ...)

Lk 14:15-23 (The wedding banquet – 'Compel them all to come in')

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Spirit – the Holy and Glorious Trinity whom David so faithfully loved and served.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: dear Carol, dear family and friends, dear colleagues, dear guests from near and far – I expect that many of you, like me, find it incomprehensible that we should be here today, for Bishop David's funeral.

Our heads hear the ringing words 'I am the resurrection and I am the life: he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die' and we know that, if they were ever true for anyone, they are most certainly true for David.

Yet our hearts are heavy, and cannot begin to grasp that we shall not hear his voice again, nor find ourselves enveloped in his huge embrace – an embrace of love that went far wider than the considerable reach of his arms.

Dear sisters and brothers – we are here today to bring to God our grief, even as we give thanks the life of a wonderful man, and commend him to the everlasting care of the one who is the Resurrection and the Life.

We come to hear God's words of comfort to us – the words of the one who has gone before us, walked the whole length of the valley of the shadow, and, through his own self-giving death, opened the gates of glory beyond for all believers.

David, we know, now has that fullness of abundant life.

And Jesus, who wept at the grave of his dear friend Lazarus – though knowing he would rise – this Jesus understands our tears even as we believe. In him we find a safe place to bring our weeping, for our dear friend.

I have known Bishop David for over 20 years. Many of you have known him for rather more of the 59 years since he was born in Witbank.

Though he was first a Chartered Secretary, it was not too long before he felt the call of God to ordination.

After training at St Paul's in Grahamstown, he was ordained deacon in 1980 and priest the following year.

He was curate, and subsequently rector, of St Boniface's Church, Germiston, before becoming rector and archdeacon of Springs in 1987.

From there he became Vicar General of the South Eastern Transvaal area of Johannesburg Diocese, before being Vicar General and then Bishop of the new Diocese, which subsequently changed its name to the Diocese of the Highveld.

These facts hardly convey the fullness of the man, the priest, the bishop, our dear friend and brother in Christ.

When I think of him, I think first of his measureless generosity and loving and caring and self-giving – as a friend, colleague, pastor.

And, Carol, we could all see that he was no different in marriage.

Carol, our hearts go out to you, and all the family today – especially with David's death having come so soon after his sister's.

We hold you in our prayers and in our love.

We also want to thank you for sharing him with us – and especially that, with no children of your own, he was able to become such a father figure to so many of us.

That was how I first knew him, when he came to lead an Ignatian retreat at St Peter's, while I was a student.

He then became my spiritual director, and was a such a wise guide in the turbulent years of the early 90s when I was at St Mary's Cathedral.

More than anything else, Bishop David would advise me to pray – and I always knew that prayer was indeed the best possible course of action, in every area of life, because I could see its effect in David's own life.

Prayer, spirituality – these words are too weak to describe the relationship that Bishop David persistently sustained and deepened with the God who is love, and who dares us to open ourselves to receive that love.

David took that risk. One could tell that here was a man who spent time – real, quality time – before God, with no pretences, with no excuses: just opening himself up to receive whatever the Lord had for him.

This was true, no matter what the Lord had in store. He wrote this to a friend, just a couple of months ago:

‘I was saying to my Chapter that my prayers are only for God’s will to be done. If that will is for healing I will embrace it fully, but if it is not, I look forward to the vision of God that I have known and will see more clearly; and to be caught up in the wonder of that Trinitarian love that Jesus makes possible for us. We must not pray as though we fear death.’

That ‘wonder of Trinitarian love’ had grasped David in the very core of his being. He loved to speak of the experience once on retreat, when he felt he had been caught up, in Christ, into the very fullness the dynamic love that flows between Father, Son and Spirit.

Bishop David saw the importance of the mystical dimension of faith. As he said at an international inter-faith conference last year,

‘Perhaps the time has come to move beyond addressing secular authority through “prophetic witness” and “speaking the truth – God’s Truth – to power.” Perhaps now is the time for “mystical witness” and “breathing the spirit – God’s Spirit – to souls”.’

God’s overflowing love, reaching out unconditionally to everyone, as our gospel reading told us, flowed through David, similarly unconstrained.

It was exemplified in David’s important work in ecumenism, especially in relations with the Roman Catholic Church.

Similarly, within Anglicanism, including through his membership of the Lambeth Commission that produced the Windsor report, he wanted to help heal and restore broken relationships.

He was so pleased to be able to attend this year's Lambeth Conference – and his presence was so much appreciated.

Such love also fuelled his unstinting work within the field of HIV and AIDS – conscious that the Church has too often stigmatised and excluded those who are infected or affected. He was adamant that they too should share in God's banquet.

And today, as we celebrate this Eucharist, we know that David shares with us, at the wedding feast of the lamb. 'For', as St Paul reassured us in our second reading, 'nothing – neither life nor death – can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

When Bishop David was at St Dunstan's in May for the Patronal Festival, he quoted earlier verses from St Paul's letter to the Romans – 'For we know that in all things, God works for good, for those who love him ...' and for him this included his leukaemia.

In late August, taken into hospital because of his low white blood cell count, he could send round a text message saying 'Being in ICU is a bit like being on retreat – with time for reading and prayer.'

Even in illness, David's humour never deserted him. Last month he said to me, 'Do you know why they measure your height and weight when you are admitted to hospital? It's because they all have shares in AVBOB.'

I remember visiting David when he had his heart attack (in ?1993), and the peace that radiated from him then.

He told me that he was ready to go home, to join the company of the redeemed.

Well, it was not to be then – and we are grateful for the vast amount that he has done for us since.

Yet the ways of life and death remain so much beyond our comprehension.

As our reading from Isaiah said, we find it so unfair, so unjust, that someone who was making such a tremendous contribution to the furthering of God's kingdom should suffer illness as he did. We find it more than irrational that he should die when there seemed so much more for him to give.

However, Isaiah adds this strange phrase 'through him – through his suffering – the will of the Lord shall prosper'.

And yes, even in my sadness, I already see something of this.

It is as though David for so many years taught us by example how it is that we should live.

And at the end, he also taught us by example how it is that we should die.

We could see that he trusted in the promises of God which St Peter spells out for us in his first letter:

‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed...’ (1 Pet 1:3-5)

It was typical of Bishop David that he told some of us that, should he die soon, he wanted his funeral to speak not so much of him, but of his Lord, and the gospel promise, the sure and certain promise of the resurrection to new life.

For David knew, and wanted us to know, as St Peter goes on to say, that, though we do not see Jesus now, we believe in him; and so we can rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for we are indeed receiving the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls. (Paraphrase of 1 Pet 1:8,9)

So let me end with a verse from John's gospel, chapter 5. These are words that were spoken by Jesus himself – but could just as easily have been said by David. It seems to me they sum up his life.

'I seek not to do my own will, but to do the will of him who sent me.' (Jn 5:30)

Well done, good and faithful servant, may you rest in peace – and rise in glory.

Amen.