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Clergy and Layworkers' Conference, Cape Town Diocese
First Homily – Jesus and his Baptism
7 October 2008

Luke 10:38-42

Lord Jesus Christ, we come to sit at your feet, and listen. Open our ears to your words, open our minds to your message, and our hearts to your call – and help us to choose the better part. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ – fellow labourers in the vineyard that is the Diocese of Cape Town – I am very grateful to God for this opportunity to spend time with you, and particularly to be able to give the homilies this week.

Having been in Bishops court for six months, I am beginning to get a feel for the breadth of responsibilities across Province and Diocese, and how they fit together; and I am also beginning to get the feel of life within the Diocese of Cape Town.

So now seems a particularly good time to step back and reflect – and reflect in conversation with you – where we are, and where we are going.

What I want to do is return to the themes of my Charge, and also draw on what I said at the Diocesan Standing Committee, and at our Diocesan Family Day at Bishop's last month. In particular I want to underline that we are a people who are both called and sent; and that we are sent, so to speak, to do 'service delivery' with the gospel.

The question of how we do such 'service delivery' will be addressed specifically in some of our other sessions this week. What I want to do is concentrate on what such a calling and sending means for us, as clergy and layworkers, leaders in the life of this Diocese – and especially in ensuring that we are allowing God to do his 'service delivery' in our lives.

In this, I am going to base my three homilies around three aspects of Jesus' life –

- Today – Jesus and his Baptism – Jesus' ministry is rooted in the affirmation he receives at baptism of God's love; and so too must ours be;
- Tomorrow – Jesus and his Disciples – his training and mentoring and modelling – and how we can also sustain this close walk with him;
- Thursday – Jesus and his Care for Others – Jesus' ministry reflected deep intimacy with his Father in heaven – an intimacy he desires to share with us, and share through us.

Through them all, I shall draw on the daily readings from the Gospel of St Luke. Once again we find that the Holy Spirit was mightily at work in directing the compilers of the lectionary, to provide us with readings that seem entirely tailored to our themes!

So let me return to the beginning and set the scene.

In my Charge, I spoke about 'sekgo sa metse': channels of living water, channels of the breath of God, channels of his Spirit of peace. I drew from the gospel reading from John 20, where the risen Jesus breathed on the disciples, saying 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.'

We the church, need to know, and show we know, that breath of Jesus Christ upon our lives.

His breath must animate his body, the Church.

Or, putting it in another way, as I also did in the Charge: as 'partners together in the gospel', we must 'seek afresh to discover what it is to be the body of Christ in our time, and who God is in Jesus Christ for us, here and now'.

Yes, this is our task, to be the body of Christ, to communicate the reality of Jesus and his gospel, in 2008 and beyond – and so do as South Africans, residents of this complex and diverse city of Cape Town.

As I outlined at the Diocesan Standing Committee, and again at Bishop's, on Heritage Day, it seems to me that there is one very particular challenge that faces us at the moment – that mirrors the challenge to the political life of this country, 14 years into our democratic journey.

The men of vision helped launch us on this journey – Desmond Tutu, like Nelson Mandela, possessed a gift for expressing profound truths with great simplicity. The Arch gave us a vision of hope for abundant new life for everyone, transformed through God's promises.

But turning vision into concrete action is hard work, and requires appropriate structures. Archbishop Njongo, our so-called 'Canon Bureaucrat', was exactly the successor we needed to build these practical bridges from vision to reality, not least in the long overdue restructuring of this diocese.

South Africa at the political level also found its visionary replaced by a technocrat – a technocrat who lost his place, not least because he lost touch with the situation of those he was supposed to lead. For, sadly, our government has been failing on service delivery. The democratic vision was not being delivered in ways that make a tangible, sustainable, lasting difference to those in greatest need of change.

The same question faces the Church, as I also said to Provincial Standing Committee.

We must ask ourselves 'Are we doing "service delivery"?'

By this, I do not mean, are we running effective social development programmes on poverty, HIV and AIDS, the environment, and the other needs around us. Vital though these are, they are not our number one calling.

My question is this: are we doing 'service delivery' with the Gospel?

The gospel is about God's good news in Jesus Christ for every individual, every community, the whole human family, and all of creation.

Whoever we are, and however we got to be that way; whatever our past, whatever our burdens, whatever our circumstances, and whatever we face – God desires that we come to experience the fullness of the gospel in every area of our lives.

It is then out of this fullness of the gospel that we can and should live, for him and for those to whom he sends us.

On Heritage day, I spoke about the need for us to be the body of Christ in ways that helped people in our parishes to experience tangibly, for themselves, God's promises in Jesus Christ of healing and wholeness, of forgiveness and reconciliation and new hope.

And of course, this is very challenging, because although we share the same broad, overarching vision, each circumstance requires that it is made concrete in particular ways. It is a case of one gospel, expressed in many differentiated ways.

What this means for our ministry within Cape Town is the underlying question that we are addressing in various of this week's sessions.

In these, I have a particular concern to ensure that the gospel not only provides the initial impetus for what we do in our various programmes and projects. More than this, it must shape and resource all that we do in both content and practice. If this is not the case, the risk is that we are little more than another social development, or health, or environmental NGO.

We will be short-changing others if we do not give them the whole gospel. And we will be undermining ourselves – because it is in Jesus that we find the vision and the strength, to live the gospel life to which we are called.

And this returns me to the heart of what I want to speak about this week: This is the need that all of *us* have, in our lives, to receive the fullness of the gospel, through feeling the continuing transfiguring touch of God's loving hand.

Being a human being is, in many ways, a dehumanising experience in itself – no matter what our past, our present, we need God's love to carry us, bear us, shape

us, mould us, so we can gradually regain a fuller humanity, the humanity that is found in putting on Christ.

And I am sure that some of us were particularly battered and broken by the past, and bear its scars on our souls – whether through political circumstance or personal and private pains.

Are we allowing ourselves, and helping one another, to be touched by Jesus' healing hand of love?

When we find ourselves heavily burdened by experience and memories, how are we putting ourselves in the place to hear the voice of the one who says 'come unto me and rest'?

Today's gospel reading gave us the example of Mary of Bethany, who sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to what he was saying.

Jesus said of her that she had 'chosen the better part' and that this 'would not be taken away from her.'

There is no substitute in our lives for developing the habit in prayer of sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening.

Yet often it is not easy to do.

Wondering why we find it hard, and why Mary seemed to find it easy, it struck me that perhaps there is a difference in our relationship with Jesus.

Mary knows that she is welcomed by Jesus – even without specific words, she feels warmly invited to come and sit and listen. She knows, in head and heart, that Jesus' arms of welcome are always extended to her. She is coming into the presence of someone who loves her greatly, and who affirms her deeply.

[Parallel with small children climbing into parents' bed / onto parents' lap – without having to ask, just knowing they are welcome – and without further ado, relaxing, falling asleep ...?]

Mary has felt a very special love overflow from Jesus. It is a love that is directed specifically at her – even as she knows that a similar love is specifically directed at the others who sit around, embraced in the warmth of that loving gaze.

Jesus can love like this, because he has experienced love like this.

And this finally brings me to the essence of today's theme – Jesus and his Baptism.

Let me read the account from Luke's gospel:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form

like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Do you know the strength of that affirmation on your life 'YOU, Garth, Rowan, are my son, the beloved; you, Erica, Nola, ... are my daughter, the beloved'

Perhaps you want to say to me 'But, Archbishop, I am not Jesus – it is different for me!'

Well, now I will quote John's gospel to you instead.

'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you'.

Do you know that love of Jesus?

And if not, what are you doing about it?

There is NO excuse! Or are you more powerful than the love of God: such that you, your circumstances, the pains and the angers that you hold to yourself, are able to keep the love of God at bay?

And if you consider yourself as beyond the reach of God's love, or if parts of your life are 'no go' areas for his transformative, redemptive touch, do you think that this does not show, or does not overflow into other areas of your life, and your relationships, and your ministry?

Of course, we know, as the Thirty Nine Articles remind us, that 'the unworthiness of Ministers hinders not the effect of the Sacraments'.

But how can we preach what we are not practicing?!

And why cut ourselves off from such rich empowering for the life to which we believe ourselves called?

Of course, it is risky and frightening to bring our deepest insecurities, pains and fears into the bright light, the sunshine of God's love – but nothing is beyond the reach of his love, as St Paul's letter to the Romans reminds us.

Our number one calling is to 'strive to rest' in the love of God – to abide in his love, to dwell in his love. (Jn 15)

As the Westminster Shorter Catechism's first question and answer say (with apologies for the out of date language!) 'Man's chief end is to worship God and to enjoy him for ever.'

Brothers and sisters, make it your first, your overall priority, to pursue whatever it takes to find that enjoyment of God that comes from knowing, with every fibre of

your being, that he loves you, in every fibre of your being, far more than you can ever possibly imagine.

And be reassured by Jesus' words to Mary of Bethany – for those who choose this better part, it will NOT be taken away from us.

So let me end with a prayer for you, for all of us, with words from the letter to the Ephesians:

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you might be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph 3:18,19)

Amen