

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
World AIDS Day Service
St George's Cathedral
1 December 2008

Mark 12:28-34a

(Theme / t-shirt slogan: 'In a world living with HIV, God calls us to *Love your neighbour as yourself* – share, support, empower, care, protect')

May I speak in the name of the God who is love, who calls us to live in love with him and one another.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I greet you in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I'm not sure how World AIDS Day came to be on the first of December, but, twenty years on from its first celebration, I have to say that 1 December is a very appropriate day.

Within the calendar of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, today we remember Nicholas Ferrer, who was not a priest, but a deacon.

In the Anglican Church, a deacon is someone ordained [quote] 'to a special ministry of humble service' [quote]. Deacons are called in the name of Jesus Christ, to serve all people, and to seek out particularly the poor, the sick and the lonely.

Deacons are told [quote], 'At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving those in need, they are serving Christ himself' [unquote].

So deacons are meant to encourage all of us to a life of diakonia, the Biblical word meaning 'service of others', and of sharing the love and care of Jesus Christ with everyone we meet, especially those with particular needs.

Today, and every day, all of us are called, as our t-shirts proclaim, and as our Gospel reading reminds us, to 'love our neighbours as ourselves'.

In St Luke's gospel, when Jesus is speaks of loving our neighbours as ourselves, he is asked 'who is my neighbour'.

You may remember that in response he tells the story of the good Samaritan. The point here is that when a Jewish traveller is set upon by thieves and left for dead at the side of the road, the priest or religious leader walk by on the other side of the road. They don't want to get involved. Instead, the one who stops to help him is the Samaritan, who would have been despised by Jesus's listeners.

It is the stigmatised outsider whom Jesus depicts as acting according to God's will, showing God's love to another.

Well, I leave you to draw your own conclusions from this.

But today I want to ask a different question.

What does it mean to love our neighbour?

How can we get beyond an attitude of emotional benevolence towards other people that may be well-meaning enough, but conveys little in concrete terms?

The answer lies in taking the two great commandments together.

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength ... and love your neighbour as yourself.'

God wants us to live in love with him, and with one another.

And, says Jesus, love encompasses our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength.

In other words, loving has an emotional, a spiritual, a mental or intellectual, and a physical dimension.

And we need to take all these into account in loving one another, as well as in loving God.

First, is loving with our heart. This might seem the most obvious – but when it comes to World AIDS Day, we need to make a reality check.

This is certainly not about those who are HIV negative patronising those who are infected or affected by AIDS.

No, loving our neighbours as ourselves means a relationship of respect and mutuality, between those who are of equal value and equal importance in the sight of God.

Inequality – or, perhaps it is better to say, difference – may arise elsewhere: as we differ in our wealth, our gifts, our talents, our advantages, our needs. But at heart, we are equal in status as we relate to one another.

And when I say 'status', I mean every sort of status.

This is why we use the slogan that develops a verse from Paul's letter to the Galatians: in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female – in Christ there is no positive or negative.

For in him we are equal, in him we are one – and the love we share declares this.

By the way, it is vital that we all do know our status. Testing is important – everyone should do it. I have been tested. Have you? And we should be prepared to be tested regularly – the Dean, and others, are going for voluntary counselling and testing immediately after this service. Follow their example.

What then of loving with our souls?

This means praying for one another, of course – and it also means caring too for one another's spiritual life.

Here the challenge is to the churches and religious leaders.

Are our churches, our places of worship, equally open to everyone?

Are our services, and our preaching, speaking to everyone the word of God which they need to hear?

Jesus reached out to everyone who crossed his path, without discrimination. Do we also?

And are we unafraid to talk honestly, openly, about God's best for us in every area of our living – sexuality included – and in every area of our dying.

Perhaps these days, death is an even bigger taboo than sex!

But death is real for each of us, regardless of our status.

Jesus Christ, died upon the cross and rose again so that no-one, ever again, need feel they are facing death alone, or separated from the love of God.

He died so that we need not fear that death will defeat us – he was raised to new life, so that as we put our hand in his, whoever we are, he will hold us tight, and not let go, and bring us to share that same new life.

If we are to love with all our soul, let us be unafraid to live as those who truly believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Right teaching of the truths of God are also part of what it means to love with all our mind.

God gives us brains, and he expects us to use them!

Another important way of loving with our minds is ensuring that we are properly informed – that we know the facts about HIV and about AIDS; about transmission; about what is risky and what is not; about what to do in various circumstances; about testing; about treatment.

We need information about anti-retrovirals and how to get them, so that we, or our neighbour, can gain access to them.

At the recent poverty hearings, we heard that sometimes people stop taking their anti-retrovirals because they are afraid they will lose the disability grant. Accurate information can help us choose wisely in continuing treatment.

Accurate information also gives us ammunition for pressing our government to improve its delivery of treatment, so that people are not penalised when their health improves.

Delivery is one of the three global themes of World AIDS Day: Lead, Empower, Deliver.

We thank God for our new Health Minister, and we offer our prayers, our support – and our pressure too, where it is needed – for her and her department, and the departments with which they partner: for them to deliver universal access to comprehensive programmes of treatment, care and support.

We also want to see better delivery, service delivery, in tackling poverty, of which HIV and AIDS so readily feed.

Another area where we need better understanding is of the extent of the relationship that has just come to light between HIV and tik. Growing tik use feeds growing HIV infection. We need to know how to stop this.

We can also love with our minds in making sure others are well-informed – especially young people.

And when we hear stories that are wrong, explanations that are incorrect, or attitudes that discriminate or stigmatise, we must not be afraid to speak out.

Jesus said 'the truth will set you free'. As others have said, equally rightly, 'knowledge empowers'.

Empowerment of individuals and communities in overcoming HIV and AIDS is another global theme of World AIDS Day. Empowerment is, as the poster says, a fundamental part of respecting, protecting and promoting our human rights.

We also love with our minds in the decisions we take – especially about how we behave towards others.

This links to the fourth dimension – to love with all our strength, or, to put it another way, with our physical being, our bodies.

And yes, this include sex – so we should know our status, and behave appropriately.

We should seek life-long, faithful, exclusive, stable, covenant relationships – where we are there for each other, through good times and bad times, knowing that this is God’s best for us, and that he blesses us as we strive to live and love ‘as Christ loved the church’ in our most intimate relationships.

We can also use our strength to love in other ways.

During the 16 days of activism against violence against women and children, we particularly reaffirm the unacceptability of using strength to dominate others.

Whether a woman is a wife or girlfriend, we have no right to force her to have sex when she doesn’t want it. It is unacceptable, and so is hitting a woman or child, or bullying or intimidating.

Our strength is God’s gift to be used to support and protect and care, for all who are weaker than us. This is true love.

So, to sum up – we are to love our neighbours as ourselves – sharing with one another, supporting one another, empowering one another, caring for one another, protecting one another – and we are to do this with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds, and all our strength.

The South African National AIDS Council is calling on everyone today not only to observe a minute’s silence at noon [as we have done here], but to set aside 15 minutes, to reflect upon something specific we can do, to make a difference.

Why not reflect on what it would mean for you, in your family, among your friends, in your workplace, in your community, to love with heart and soul and mind and strength?

Where can you take a lead? Leading is the third global theme of World AIDS Day – it reminds us that all of us can take the initiative, and make a difference.

Later in the service you will have the chance to make a pledge, to say. ‘this is something I am going to do’, to make a difference in my life or the life of my neighbour.

And we know that God will bless us as we do, and will make us a blessing to one another.

May it be so – Amen and amen.