

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Advocate Mojanku Gumbi's Service of Thanksgiving**  
**21 December 2008**

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2 Sam 7:8-16  
Rom 16:25-27  
Lk 1:26-38

Mary said, 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word.'

Lord Jesus Christ, word made flesh: take my words and speak through them; take our minds, and speak to them; and take our hearts, and set them on fire with love for you, now and always. Amen.

Dear Gumbi, what a joy it is to share in today's celebrations! We wish you God's abundant blessings on your birthday.

Thank you for your invitation to preach – though it will come as no surprise to anyone here, that this is merely the latest in a long line of invitations from you that have been quite impossible to refuse!

The first of them came over twenty years ago, when we were at university together. It was my first year, and the elections for ANSOC, the University's Anglican Society, were coming up.

I was such a new boy – I had no awareness of all the tensions behind the scenes. So complex were the dynamics that it was impossible for any of the usual suspects to be elected to the chair.

So, in your inimitable style, you decreed that the quiet new guy should be voted in – and so I was!

And then, just the following month, while I was still reeling from this surprise, we were at the Anglican Students' Federation meeting in Natal.

Frustration was rising, as the elections for regional leaders were taking too long; and the far higher priority of conference socialising was being delayed unreasonably.

So again you took decisive action, and announced that the quiet guy should be elected without opposition as the leader of the Transvaal students. And so it happened.

Well, dear Gumbi I've had very little practice at saying no to your invitations – but when today's invitation arrived, it was with the very greatest pleasure that I said 'yes'.

And today, I want to make the focus of my sermon someone else who said 'yes' to an unexpected invitation.

Four days from Christmas, we have heard the gospel reading of the angel Gabriel visiting a young country girl, with an invitation that would radically change her life, in ways that she could barely begin to imagine.

More than that, it was an invitation that would radically change the life of the whole world, the whole of creation, the whole of eternity. No wonder Mary was perplexed.

What was she to say in response to such an invitation?

Well, it must be said that God is not a bully, nor is he bossy.

(And please do not think that I am implying that anyone else, possibly here today, who offers invitations, could be thought of as in any way bossy – any such thought, dear friends, can only be in your imaginations!)

No, God is a gentleman, and he does not force himself upon us, when he invites us to walk in his ways.

He knows what is best for us – and how his best for his world can be achieved through our response to his invitation.

But he gives us the free will to decide how we will respond.

Mary dared to say yes.

And because she said yes to God, he could give his yes of love to the world, in Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Christmas is a time of gratitude and thanksgiving – not only for birthdays, nor for graduations (congratulations to you [*name*] on your BCom!); and not only for Presidencies of long, hard, work; nor even only for presents under the tree in just a few sleeps' time.

Presents under the tree are just an echo of the greatest present of all – God's gift of himself, come to us in Jesus Christ.

He came to live as truly, fully, human. He came to die and put to death all that prevents us achieving our true and full humanity.

He came to set us free, from all that says No to God – he came to set us free to live in the sunshine of God's Yes to life in all its abundance, God's Yes to overflowing love.

And it all happened because a young girl dared to say yes.

And this young girl dares us to say yes, in our turn.

Do we dare to say as she did, 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word'?

Well, perhaps with the history of our country, we are still a little uncomfortable with the vocabulary of servanthood.

So let me put it another way, in language more familiar to today's assembled company.

Mary is, in effect saying 'Here I am, the cadre of the Lord: let me be deployed, according to your word.'

I guess we are all cadres of some sort. We all have loyalties to something, someone – perhaps a party, an ideology, a cause; or perhaps our primary loyalty is to ourselves, to our own pockets, or power, or popularity, or to our nearest and dearest, above all else.

But this young girl dares us to consider loyalty of a different sort: loyalty to the greater good that God wants to bring – the genuine good of God's best for the people of this world, especially those most in need.

It is the good of justice, of truth, of love, of forgiveness, of hope, of new beginnings, of broken hearts mended, of poverty overcome, of conflicts resolved, of oppressed liberated, of a voice for the voiceless and inclusion of the outcasts.

Or, as Mary herself put it in the hymn of praise we know as the Magnificat, it is about the mighty being brought low, and the humble being lifted up; of the hungry being fed while the rich are sent away empty.

This is a great challenge to those of us who can be thought of as mighty and rich, certainly in comparison with the average person in our country, or on our continent.

If God has deployed us as his cadres to positions of great influence, are we ready to use that deployment 'according to his word' – according to his purposes, his priorities, his principles? Are we ready to use the positions he has gifted to us, for the benefit of the low, the hungry, the poor, the needy?

Well, you may want to say to me 'Easier said than done, Archbishop!'

And from my own experience this year, I well know that it is not always easy to be in a position of leadership.

The options open to us, and what we can achieve by our own efforts, can sometimes seem very limited.

But saying Yes to God brings other resources into the equation.

By saying Yes, we open ourselves up to receive the power of his Spirit at work in us and through us.

For, as the angel Gabriel said to Mary 'Nothing is impossible with God.'

Or, as St Paul put it in our second reading, 'God is able to strengthen you, according to the gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ'.

We can dare to say yes to God, because he promises to help us live out that yes.

All it takes is that first small yes to set us on the right path.

I said yes to Gumbi all those years ago, and look where it has brought me!

But seriously, the more we say yes to God, the more we discover that we can rely on him – that he will both point us in the right direction, and see us through whatever we face on that journey forwards.

It is often said that the God who calls is always the God who equips. He never asks of us something that we cannot do.

He may challenge us. He may take us where we had never expected to tread. He may lead us where, really, we'd rather not go.

But if we put our hand in his, and live a life of 'yes', then we will find life in abundance; joy in our sorrows; and the peace that passes all understanding, all common sense, all rationality, in the midst of turmoil and confusion.

So Mary's challenge is not only that one 'yes', it is to go on saying yes, through all the perplexing ups and downs of life – through the tough times, as well as through the easy times; in the face of intractable challenges, as well as when life seems to be going smoothly.

We know our God never gives up on us – and therefore we dare never to give up on the good to which he calls us.

God is in it for the long haul – that was one of the messages of our reading from the prophet Isaiah.

So we too can dare to take a long perspective, not least when it comes to tackling poverty, building the habits of democracy, overcoming the painful legacies of the past, resolving conflicts, bringing peace and opening opportunities of prosperity to all.

We can dare to persevere – even in the face of the problems of our country, of our neighbours, of our continent.

We can dare to keep pressing to live out ubuntu in practice, not only in slogans.

We can dare to keep hoping; we can dare to face down despair; we can dare to pass up the offer of an easy life where we leave the problems of the day to others, to a new generation.

We can dare to roll up our sleeves in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, and know that, by God's grace, we can be part of the solution.

Dear Gumbi, today we celebrate fifty golden years. We thank God for you, for all the many talents he has given you, for all the ways that he has used you.

We give thanks in particular for the opportunities you have had to work so close to the heart of power. We give thanks for all that has been achieved, especially in collaboration with you, Mr Mbeki, during your time as President.

We look to the past – and we see the evidence of God's guidance, God's support. Therefore we are encouraged, even as we look ahead to all that still remains to be done.

So today we look back with thanksgiving and gratitude – allowing our lives to be shaped by our appreciation of all God, in his love for us and for his world, does for us and through us.

And look forward to all that God has in store, to all to which he invites us, and we dare to say 'Yes – here I am, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word'.

May it be so.

Amen.