

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Eucharist**  
**St Paul's Rondebosch**  
**15 February 2009**

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2 Chron 7:11-18;

Ps 122

1 Cor 9:24-27;

Mk 1:40-45

May I speak in the name of God, who makes his dwelling among his people. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear people of St Paul's Rondebosch. It is a great joy and delight to be with you as you celebrate the one hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary of the opening of the first Church on this site.

Indeed, I am a little awed – your church is considerably older than the office of the Archbishop of Cape Town!

But from Bishopscourt to Rondebosch, all of us share a debt of gratitude to those pioneers of the nineteenth century, who had the vision, and the determination, and the persistence to plant and grow the church.

So much of what we enjoy and celebrate today, we owe to them, and to many others in the intervening years.

When I read the passage we have just heard, from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, about competing athletes, so often the picture that springs to mind is of a relay race.

Others ran before us.

They ran to compete – they did their best on the course they found beneath their feet. They ran so that they might cross the finishing line and be worth of a prize.

But it is as if they also were part of the race we run.

They passed on a baton to those who came after, and so on through every generation of the family of faith.

Now, as relay race batons go, a church building is a pretty large one, I admit.

But we are not only celebrating a building today – we are celebrating what it stands for.

It is the very house of God.

It is a declaration, right in the heart of Rondebosch that God is in our midst.

At the centre of the trade and the commerce; the busy offices and the busier traffic, God is present.

There is no business we can conduct without God's eye being upon us; God's concern reaching us; God's desire for justice and honesty calling to us; God's promise of blessing waiting for us.

So too, here, where the roots of the University spread down the mountain, God is present.

There is no pursuit of knowledge, no yearning for understanding that lies apart from the One who is the Truth – and the Way and the Life.

There is no authentic education, no genuine study, that does not in some way reflect our Saviour who was called Good Teacher and Rabbi, and who in turn called his followers disciples, 'those who learn'.

And there is no-one to whom Jesus does not say 'follow me'.

We are to pick up the baton in our turn, and run the race in our turn.

How shall we run it?

Well, let us turn to the gospel story.

Jesus heals a leper. Yet he sternly warns the leper to say nothing to anyone, only show himself to the priest.

This seems a strange thing for Jesus to do – though his instruction to say nothing is a message repeated throughout St Mark's gospel.

Well, we see what happens when the healed leper disobeys. He talks about Jesus so much, to so many, that, says St Mark, 'Jesus could no longer go into a town openly'.

It seems that people came rushing to Jesus to find a miracle cure.

And this prevented him from achieving his goal.

His purpose lay in making disciples, in having people come to him, not because of any amazing act he could perform – but because of who he was.

It is only at the end of St Mark's gospel that we find Jesus acknowledging to more than just his inner circle that he is indeed the King of the Jews, the Messiah of God, the Son of Man.

For he was not the sort of King or Messiah that popular opinion wanted.

They wanted someone to come and solve their problems – to sweep aside the Romans, and restore them as a proud and prosperous nation; and preferably one that had the upper hand among those other peoples who lived around them and among them.

But Jesus' idea of rescuing us is rather different!

He has of course, made the greatest rescue of all, through his death and resurrection.

But he does not say 'Stand back, sit down, I'm going to do it all for you' when it comes to running the race of life.

Rather he says, 'I'm going to do it with you' – or, even more accurately, he invites us to do it with him!

He wants us to run alongside him, to run as he runs, to live as he lived; understanding, as his disciples only fully understood after his resurrection, that his was a messiahship of service and servanthood.

His is a kingship of humility, a lordship that reaches out to the poor, the lost, the broken, the hurting. He came to bring good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed – not to party with the powerful, rich and famous!

And once the disciples had grasped the essence of who Jesus really was, then they were no longer told to keep his identity a secret.

In the longer ending to St Mark's gospel, found in some of the early manuscripts, we read how Jesus appears to the disciples after his resurrection, and tells them 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation'.

It is the same instruction we find in St Matthew's gospel and St Luke's and St John's.

What then, about the leper?

Well, in a way he was right to tell everyone about Jesus – because everyone does need to hear about Jesus.

But he was wrong in his message about Jesus.

The message of this gospel passage is not, first and foremost, that Jesus can work miracles.

Of course, the fact that Jesus performs miracles is a sign of who he is, the Son of God.

But the real message is that in performing this act of healing, Jesus has compassion on the despised, he reaches out to the rejected, he touches the untouchable; and he remakes the contact between this individual and his God – for this man was unclean according to Old Testament law, and was barred and excluded from the Temple, the place of the presence of the Lord.

As we pick up the baton from those who went before us; as we heed Jesus' call to run the race alongside him, this is the course to which he calls us.

We too are to draw others into the presence of the Lord.

We should ask ourselves, who are our 'lepers'?

There are those whom society looks down on – homeless alcoholics, perhaps. And in these days, perhaps bankers and commercial lawyers often find themselves despised.

But we also need to ask, who are the churches' lepers? Who are the people who are made to feel unwelcome within our walls?

Do we set unrealistic – or perhaps hypocritical – standards, about moral purity? Do we send out the message that you have to be successful according to certain codes of decency?

Is this a church that is a safe and supportive place for the realities of life – that sometimes people battle in their marriages, and fail; sometimes messiness in relationships happens; sometimes HIV spreads; sometimes relations between parents and children go awry; sometimes people find themselves struggling to deal with alcohol, or tik, or another addiction; sometimes the transition from learner to student draws us into lifestyles of which we are not proud; sometimes ethical issues at work sweep us up into what we would rather avoid; sometimes people live with secret burdens of things they did, or did not do, in the turmoil of our difficult past.

Perhaps you watched the Heartlines series on TV. There is going to be a new series, called Hopeville, starting later this month.

These deal with real people, decent people – wrestling with real issues, difficult issues that threaten to get out of hand.

Sometimes, despite what we yearn for, life goes off the rails.

And then we need, not condemnation by the holier-than-thou-brigade, which is how others often see the church, but real honesty, real help.

We need to know that Jesus reaches out to us with love, with hope, with the promise that he will be alongside us, encouraging us, supporting us, strengthening us, and guiding us into the paths of healing, of holiness, and of the life in abundance which is his desire for each one of us.

This is the God who longs to be in the midst of the lives of every person here, and every person in Rondebosch, and every person at UCT.

This is the message that he longs for us to share.

Today we celebrate his presence among us, in a very particular way through the life of St Paul's, over 175 years.

So let us pick up our batons, and run our race. The course beneath our feet – the circumstances of our lives – may be different for each of us. But Jesus invites us to run alongside him.

And he invites us to share his presence, proclaim him freely, and spread the word – a little like the leper, but with the tender and compassionate welcome for all that Jesus showed.

So may the life of St Paul's flourish abundantly, in the next 175 years, and may you bring the abundant and flourishing life of Christ, to all around.

Amen.