

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Ash Wednesday
Day of Prayer and Fasting for Zimbabwe
Cathedral Church of St George the Martyr
25 February 2009

Isaiah 58:1-9
Psalm 51:1-12
1 Corinthians 9:24-27
Matthew 6:16-21

May I speak in the name of God, who breaks every yoke and sets the oppressed free. Amen

Robert Gray said this in 1876 "I am now going to begin daily prayers on Ash Wednesday.... Lent does not seem to be observed here, and there are no services at the Cathedral except on Sunday.

Things have indeed changed; we are not only observing Lent but have ecumenical and interfaith services regularly in this Cathedral.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, once more Lent is upon us.

Once more we are called to a season of penitence; to a time of reflection of our need of God, and of all that he has done for us.

Some people approach Lent with trepidation – fearing that its purpose is to make us feel guilty, to make us feel bad about ourselves.

Nothing could be farther from the truth!

The lesson from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah speaks of God's desire for the oppressed to go free, and for every yoke to be broken.

Lent is a time of reflection on how we are oppressed by sin and death, how their yoke sits heavily on the necks of humanity. This is true.

But it is also a time for reflecting how God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten Son: to give his life so that sin and death might be defeated; and that we might know freedom from oppression, and the glorious liberty of the kingdom of God.

Penitence is about recognising with greater honesty, and with greater discontentment, how bad it is for us to live without God.

For then we have a greater appreciation of, and desire for, how good it is to live *with* God!

Prayer and fasting are designed to help us do this.

Prayer is God's gift, given to draw us closer to him; so that we can find ourselves caught up into Jesus' prayers for the world; so that we can learn to see the world as he sees it, and to care for it as he cares.

The heart of prayer is listening, more than it is speaking. God does not need persuading to show love and mercy to his world!

Listening in prayer is hard work, but it is worth striving hard to learn. Make sure your churches teach you ways to practice listening to God!

It isn't easy. There are so many distractions!

This is where fasting comes in.

Fasting is about putting something aside to making more space for God. It is about stepping back from distractions and complications into a simpler way of being.

It can be giving up a meal – or giving up meat, or alcohol, or eating more simply.

We can fast from other things.

What about an evening without television, spent in quietness; instead of being fed, overfed even, with the diversion of entertainment?

In this space, this quiet simplicity, we can come close to God, listen to him, learn from him, and let him change us to be more like Jesus.

What we have saved – maybe time, maybe energy, maybe the cost of a meal – we can use to further God's liberating love for his world.

Because God's promise to break yokes and set the oppressed free is not just for us within our spiritual lives. (And our Gospel reading warned against pretending to piety for its own sake.)

He calls us increasingly to be channels of his liberating love in every area of human existence.

This is why the whole Anglican Communion world-wide is observing today as a day of prayer and solidarity with the people of Zimbabwe.

The injustice, the oppression, the hunger, the deprivation they have suffered is hard for us to grasp. Their needs are desperate: the most basic medication for clinics and hospitals; money to pay for the marking of last year's exam papers, let alone civil servants' salaries.

Although many have had reservations in the past about whether the inclusive government agreed upon last September can work, it is right now the only hope which the people of Zimbabwe have, and we must do all we can to make it work.

I therefore appeal to all South Africans, including the Government – and also to the SADC nations, to the European Union and the United States – to give generously in response to the pleas for assistance of Prime Minister Tsvangirai.

As Anglicans, we can fast for the people of Zimbabwe and donate what we save as a result of our Lenten observances to support them.

Most important of all, we can pray for Zimbabwe and all its people, and I ask that you do this, not only today, but throughout Lent – persevering in your prayers, as new circumstances with the power-sharing government unfold – persevering in prayer, like the runners of our second reading.

They will know that throughout the world, we are upholding them in prayer.

We are aligning ourselves with the prayers of Jesus, who desires for Zimbabwe – for all who suffer – everything which we heard in our first lesson.

Let me read some of these verses again; and as I do so, hold the people of Zimbabwe in your hearts and minds:

'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?

'Is it not to share your bread with the hungry to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?'

'Then you light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

'Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say "Here I am".'

Through our prayers and fasting, may God's light break like dawn upon Zimbabwe, and his healing come quickly, and may all Zimbabwe's people know that when they cry for help, the Lord says 'Here I am'.

Amen.