

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
ACC – Sermon in Local Church
10 May 2009

Ps 66:1-11
Acts 8:26-40
Jn 14:15-21

[Opening greetings]

‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’ says Jesus to his closest followers, just hours before he is betrayed and handed over to be crucified.

‘If you love me ...’

These are powerful words.

We know this. In our worse moments, we are tempted to use them for our own purposes!

How often have we said to a partner, a parent, a child:

- Sweetheart! If you love me, you’ll let me go to the football with my friends instead of visiting your mother!
- Daddy! If you love me, you’ll let me stay overnight at my friends’ party!
- My child! If you love me, you’ll stop wearing those awful fashions!

In other words, ‘If you love me, you’ll do things MY way, even though I know it is not what you want!’

It’s almost blackmail!

And sometimes, aren’t we a little afraid this is what God is doing to us?

‘Love me, and do what I tell you – or else?’

Sometimes preachers give us a picture of God that is full of judgement and condemnation, a God who it is easier to fear than to love.

Well, it is true that God judges and condemns – but what he judges and condemns is anything and everything that prevents us from becoming the fruitful, flourishing, human beings he created us to be – walking hand in hand with him, enjoying the good gifts of his love.

‘Be fruitful and multiply – be fruitful and flourish!’

Genesis tells us this is God’s purpose for humanity, whom he creates in his image, and for all living creatures.

God loves us and wants the best for us – and for all of his creation.

He shows us this in Jesus, who laid down his life for his friends, saying ‘I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly’ (Jn 10:10);

‘I love you!’ says God to us in Jesus. ‘I want the best for you – and the way for you to have the best of life, in all its abundance, is to live my way!’

The church’s mission and ministry (which is at the heart of all we are discussing at the ACC meeting) is, at heart, all about helping everyone to live in God’s way – in the way that is best for us.

How, then, do we know what this means in practice?

Sometimes it is not easy to know what the Bible’s teaching means in our contemporary contexts – for example, how we should vote, or deal with crime and justice, or develop economic policies.

Where do we begin when we are faced with personal choices? And how do we help shape our societies into the sort of places where people can learn to be fruitful and flourish according to the love of God?

Let me quote another well-known passage from Genesis – the story of Noah.

After the flood has subsided, God blessed Noah and his sons. Again he tells them to be fruitful, to flourish, and fill the earth.

He tells them that they must not shed human life; he promises that he will never again destroy the earth's inhabitants with a flood; and he sends a rainbow as the sign of this covenant.

In this I see three principles, three touchstones, for the way we should live, and help others to live:

- First – the sanctity of human life – from the moment of conception through to treating the disabled, the sick, the dying, with the utmost respect.
- Second – the integrity of creation – which includes protecting our environment.
- Third – the dignity of difference – from the colours in the rainbow, to the biodiversity of our planet, to the variety of humanity ourselves, created in every possible race and colour and language and culture and personality and character.

When faced with today's challenges, we can ask ourselves 'How here can I, can we, preserve the sanctity of life; uphold the integrity of creation; and promote the dignity of difference?'

And we can challenge others over whether their words, their actions, meet these principles.

William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944, was a very wise man. He said that it is the responsibility of the church to hold Christian principles before the society in which we live – so that Christian people can live them out in our daily lives, in our families and communities, in our work and even in the political life of our countries.

And here is the best news of all – God does not give us the principles and then leave us alone to work out how to apply them!

No, he is with us, guiding us, encouraging us, supporting us, strengthening us, every single step of the way!

This is the role of the Holy Spirit, who comes to abide in all who trust in Jesus, who make him Lord of their lives, who give themselves to him.

'I will ask the Father' says Jesus 'and he will give you another Advocate, another Helper, to be with you for ever.'

Amen to this!

God does not promise us that life will be easy – but he promises that if we trust in him, he will be with us all the way, helping us, through thick and thin.

So, dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

Let God love you – and let his love overflow in the lives you choose to lead.

Entrust yourselves to God – and let his Spirit live in you, and guide your lives into the best ways possible.

This is the mission of the church – that God's people, God's world, should live as he, in his love, desires us to live:

- With all human life regarded as sacred
- With human action preserving, not destroying our planet
- With our differences treated with dignity and respect.

And through all this may we, those we love, and the world to which God sends us in mission, be fruitful and flourish – for his praise, and for his glory!

Amen