

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Diocese of Mpumalanga – Fifth Anniversary Celebration
6 June 2009

Deut 29:2-15
Ps 144
2 Cor 9:1-15
Mk 12:38-44
Collect of the Ninth Sunday of the Year

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Dear people of the Diocese of Mpumalanga, dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let me say again what a great delight it is to be with you today, as you celebrate this anniversary.

Happy fifth birthday to you all!

I must say, I am looking forward to cutting the very impressive birthday cake later in the service!

But first, let us feed on the word of God – and then feed also on the body and blood of Christ, the Word made flesh, who gave his life that we might have life in abundance.

God's covenant promise of glorious and abundant life is indeed our theme today.

It runs through all our Bible readings. These are in fact the readings set by our lectionary for this morning! How great is the generosity of God, how marvellous the working of his Holy Spirit, that we find that they perfectly fit this occasion!

Covenant and Promise

Let us begin with Covenant and Promise

Our first reading, from the book of Deuteronomy, sets the scene.

Moses reminds the ancient people of Israel of the journey on which God has led them.

He reminds them how God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and has been with them ever since: leading and guiding them, protecting and preserving them, and bringing his blessing. Every step of the way, God has been faithful to them.

This, says Moses, is the nature of God's covenant promise.

In all they have experienced, they have been his people, and he has been their God.

Now, says Moses, we are ready to go forward, into the Promised Land, into the new future that God will unfold before you.

The question is this, says Moses – at this point of new beginnings, will you join in a renewal of this covenant with God?

Will you commit yourselves to be his people, and to let him be your God? – for he certainly desires to establish such a covenant, so he can continue to bless you in the future, as he has blessed you in the past.

I am sure you can see the parallels!

Yes, we are speaking of the covenant promises of the same Lord who led the Diocese of Mpumalanga out of Pretoria – though it was hardly slavery there [*even if Bishop Jo can be a bit tough at times!*!]

And though it has been five, not forty, years, and though the beautiful Province of Mpumalanga is very, very, different from the wilderness of Sinai, the Lord has been with you on your journey.

He has led and guided you, he has protected and preserved you, and he has brought his blessing. Every step of the way, God has been faithful to you.

I have heard so many stories of the joys, great and small, which you have experienced over the last five years.

Just one example is the Families 4 Families programme in the Parish of Sabie, which will be presented with an award from Hope Africa in a few minutes. We offer them our congratulations.

This is just one of the creative ways that the God's kingdom is being built, and his name glorified, in the life of the Diocese of Mpumalanga.

God's Glorious and Abundant Life for Us

One of your clergy said recently, 'we are like those mentioned in the last verse of today's psalm: Blessed are the people of whom this is true: blessed are the people whose God is the Lord' (Ps 144:15).

St Paul also speaks of the way that God generously provides for us, in his second letter to the Corinthians.

'God is able to provide for you with every blessing in abundance' he writes.
'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!'

So let us pause for a moment, and give thanks to God for his gift – his gift of himself, his faithfulness, his leading and guiding, his equipping and empowering, his blessing, and his glorious abundance.

Let us stand, and give our wonderful Lord a round of applause, in gratitude for all that he has done for us, for all that we are celebrating today.

[Pause for clapping, everyone to sit down again.]

Thank you Lord!

God's Glorious and Abundant Life for Others

Of course, there is more to this promise than merely blessing for us!

God's blessing is too big for us to soak up all of it. We cannot contain all the abundance of life that God pours upon us!

It is inevitable that it will overflow from us, to all who are around!

I quoted earlier the first half of verse 8, of 2 Corinthians, Chapter 9: 'God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance' – and then, of course, St Paul goes on to say, 'so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.'

God's abundance is intended for everyone – and he delights to share with us the joyful spreading his abundance as widely, as fully, as fruitfully, as live-givingly, as possible!

Investing for the Future

Sow bountifully, and you will reap bountifully, says St Paul in our reading. Sow generously, and you will reap generously.

God's promises are more reliable than any bank or stock market, especially in these credit crunch times!

With God, the more you invest, the greater the return!

And what is more, God is a very creative accountant!

Jesus tells us just how God counts what we put in the collection plate.

In the temple, rich people are putting large amounts into the funds.

And a poor widow puts in two small copper coins – perhaps it is just two five-cent pieces.

But God says that her gift is actually of far, far, greater value!

For these rich people have given out of their surplus, out of the money they have left to spend as they like, once they have paid all their bills.

It doesn't really cost them anything to give this away – they don't feel it. For them it didn't count for much – and so, says Jesus, for God it didn't count for much either.

But the poor widow has given something far more significant. Jesus said she put in all that she had to live on. She gave God her everything.

And this is what God values highly, and takes, and turns into bountiful blessings of abundance. He does not care whether it is a big or a small amount – he cares about our generosity.

As St Paul says, 'You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God ... for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints, but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.'

All this St Paul writes for our encouragement.

He does not want us to feel guilty about how much we can give to the work of the Church.

He knows that we all have different responsibilities, different obligations, and so he says 'Each of you must give as you have made up your own mind, not reluctantly, or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.'

So we must each decide.

All other things being equal, I think we should make tithing, giving ten percent, our norm.

I know many people do this already – and some even give more. Thank you. May you find that you receive a particular blessing in your generosity.

We are often very sensitive about money – but perhaps those of us who do tithe should be more open about it, and let others know how it is easier than it seems, once you get into the habit!

I find that if I give straight away when the money comes in, that I don't miss it. It is always harder if I leave it until later.

So if you do not tithe, be encouraged to consider it! And if you cannot tithe, then thank you anyway, for giving what you can.

Of course, God is not interested in us merely for our money; and it is not merely money that we can offer to him, as we seek to 'sow bountifully' and make our sure-fire investment in the kingdom of God!

We can also invest our talents, our gifts, our experience, our expertise; and we can give our time. Some people can give more time than money – and that's OK too.

So thank you to everyone who gives their skills, who gives their time, their energy, their effort.

All this God values.

Covenant and Promise - Conclusion

But what he values most of all, is our hearts and our love.

He wants us to let him love us; he wants us to let him bless us; he wants us to let him use us as a channel of blessing for others.

Most of all, he wants us to let him be our God.

And this of course brings me back to the theme of Covenant and Promise with which we started, and the parallels between our first reading, and the life of the Diocese of Mpumalanga.

Moses says to the people: your God is faithful. You know this. He brought you out from slavery. He has led and guided and protected and provided for you ever since.

Now you are going to begin a new chapter in your lives – in the Promised Land.

Will you commit yourselves to a future that is like your past, hand in hand with God?

Will you be his people, will you let him be your God?

It is the same for us today – though I must say I do not feel much like Moses, who we always think of as an old man with a long beard!

Bishop Les is the one with the beard, and, dare I say it, a few more years than me under his belt – but he must play the part of the young and energetic Joshua, and lead you forward into the Promises of God! May the Lord bless you in all you do, Les!

So the question before all of you is this: do you today covenant with God for the future?

Will you be his people? Will you let him be your God?

As you pray in your Diocesan Prayer, will you let him pour the power of his Holy Spirit on you, clergy and laity alike, so you may be equipped and empowered for effective ministry and mission? So you can know Jesus better, and make him known more fully, as is your Diocesan Vision?

Will you let him inspire you to give generously, bountifully, so he may bless all that you do with great abundance; and make you a channel of overflowing, abundant blessing for others?

If you are ready to say yes to all this, yes to God, may I invite you to stand.

[Pause as people stand.]

And let all the people say Amen!

[Together] Amen! Amen! Amen!

As we remain standing, let me say a prayer for you all:

Lord God, as Loving Father you created us, in Jesus Christ you redeemed us, through your Spirit you sustain us.

Today these people, your sons and daughters of the Diocese of Mpumalanga, thank you for your immeasurable love for them, for your unending faithfulness to them - that you have shown in more ways than can be counted, especially over the past five years.

Today they offer themselves to you once again – that they might walk forward into the Promised Land of your future, as your people, and with you as their God.

Lord, give them strength to keep the promises they make today.

And, in the words of St Paul, provide them with every blessing in abundance, so that they may have enough of everything, and may also share abundantly in every good work.

We ask all this, for your praise and for your glory.

Amen.