

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
St Mary's Woodstock, 150th Anniversary
'Gratitude and Generosity – Receiving and Serving'
28 June 2009

2 Sam 6:1-15 (Xhosa)
Psalm 24 (Parish Psalter chant)
2 Cor 8:7-15 (English)
Mark 5:21-43 (Afrikaans)

May I speak in the name of God, who builds his church on firm foundations, and calls us to be its living stones.

Dear people of St Mary's, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let me say once again what a privilege it is to be with you, as you celebrate the 150th anniversary of the dedication of this church, and the laying of its foundation stone.

While we might not be dancing with quite the vigour of David, before the Ark of the Lord, let us not be afraid to let our hearts dance with equal joy as we delight in celebrating the presence of God with us, in this place, for a century and a half!

There is no doubt that God has remarkably blessed these gathering of Anglicans, beginning with the early days of Papendorp, even before the laying of the cornerstone, which we commemorate today.

It is said that in those days, the congregation was encouraged to attend by a 'discreet form of bribery' in the shape of clothing and tobacco for adults, and sweets for children.

Well, I'm hoping that all of you here today are present of your own free will; and that the refreshments to which we look forward – with many thanks to the City of Cape Town, and Councillor Cedric Thomas in particular, for their generosity – that these refreshments can in no way be considered a bribe!

These days, politicians and bribery are not two words that we want to hear in the same sentence!

Yet hearing about people's basic need for clothing, in the middle of the nineteenth century, helps us realise that though Papendorp became Woodstock, and Woodstock has been through many, many, changes since, some things remain unchanged.

As Jesus said, 'the poor you will always have with you' (Matt 26:11).

So today, even as we celebrate all that we have received from God, we are also challenged by the needs of others.

Our gratitude should lead to our generosity.

This is the message that St Paul is sharing in the verses we heard from his second letter to the Corinthians.

We are rich in the Lord Jesus Christ, says St Paul – for Jesus our Messiah and Saviour, became poor for our sake.

He gave up the glories of heaven, taking on human life, accepting human suffering, even death on the cross, in order that we might have life in all its fulness, all its abundance – a sure and certain guarantee of the overflowing promises of God for this life, and for the life to come.

And if this is what we have received, out of the abundant generosity of God, then surely generosity to others will flow from our gratitude.

So today, first of all, is about gratitude.

God has preserved this church and its people, through so many changes, so many challenges. Life is still full of challenges (and I doubt that ever changes, for any of us) – but you are still here, still full of the joy of the Lord, still celebrating, still giving thanks!

Indeed, in all of life, gratitude should be our first response.

We are grateful, first of all, for the gift of life itself.

And we are grateful for the reality of God's promises, that nothing in all creation can separate us from his love, and that there is no situation so terrible that he cannot work in it for good (Rom 8:28,39).

That is something we particularly remember today.

Even in the bleakest, years of this country's history, even in the darkest times of this parish – God's love could not be overcome. We also know from our own experience how he worked for good: in, and through, and despite, those difficult, difficult, circumstances.

And so, when the present, when the future, seem to threaten, we can proclaim our confidence that God will work for good again, as we once more put out hands in his, and trust in him.

Even when we face the many challenges of today – the unemployment, the crime, the drugs, the domestic violence, and so many other problems within the community of which St Mary's is a part – even when we see all these, our response finds its roots not in hopelessness or despair, but in gratitude to God, who, as our Gospel reading illustrated, came to bring healing and new life in every circumstance.

No matter what, we put out hands in the hand of God – knowing he will be with us, and see us through – and we are filled with gratitude that he is there for us.

Gratitude is the heart of thanksgiving – and thanksgiving is the essence of the Eucharist that we celebrate here today. The word Eucharist itself means 'thanksgiving'.

Our Prayer Book has some wonderful things to say about the Eucharist, in the Preface to the Service.

You will find this on p.101 – and I hope that if you have not done so, that at some point you will take time to read it. Though, not, please, in the middle of this sermon!!

The Prayer Book says that each celebration – and yes, we do 'celebrate' the Eucharist in every sense of the word – is our eucharist, our thanksgiving, to God, for his inexpressible love in giving his only Son for us: Lamb of God, bearer of our sins, redeemer of the world.

It is also our communion – as we receive, in and through the consecrated bread and wine, the benefits of Christ's sacrifice made once for all, and as we in our turn offer ourselves as living sacrifice to God. Now the Lord takes us and blesses us. He breaks us in renewed surrender and gives us as food for others.

And so, the Prayer Book reminds us, we have a two-fold movement: first, the call to come, 'draw near, and receive' – and then the summons to move out into a needy world, 'go in peace to love and serve the Lord'.

Receiving and serving – gratitude and generosity.

These are at the heart of the Eucharist, at the heart of the reading from St Paul, and at the heart of the life of the parish – from before 1859 right through to the present, and into the future.

For to love and serve the Lord means also to love and serve the Lord's people – every child of God, every human individual, who has a special place in his heart.

God himself is love, and he pours his love into our lives, so it may overflow into the lives of those whom we encounter day by day.

'Love your neighbour as yourself' he says, telling us that everyone who crosses our path is our neighbour.

And so he desires that we should create communities where each of us loves, and is loved by, our neighbours as ourselves.

Today we should also celebrate all that St Mary's does in loving your neighbours.

I know you have a busy programme of service towards the community of Woodstock: of counselling and practical assistance, in relation to drugs, to HIV and AIDS, to the abuse of women and children; that you offer home visits and grocery hampers and soup kitchens; that you have an active children's church and youth movement; and that you provide literacy classes for those who need them, and even have computer classes in the pipeline.

And I am sure that there are many other ways in which you share God's love with others.

Thank you, in the name of the Lord!

Jesus taught (in Matthew's gospel, chapter 25) that whenever you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and help anyone who is in need, it is as if you are helping him.

And he will not forget your acts of generous love.

Today I want to say how very glad I am to be part of the re-launch of the Anglican Women's Fellowship here, which has such a marvellous track record of showing generous love.

This is a remarkable organisation, with a long history of building bridges, overcoming barriers, crossing divides and reaching out – both within the community of the Anglican Church, and within the communities in which you find yourselves.

May the Lord bless you, and guide you, and strengthen you – may he give you all the resources that you need, to make a difference in the life of Woodstock. May he make you instruments of his blessing to others.

And may you always be, as the AWF slogan has it, 'United in Worship, Prayer and Service'.

Ah yes, once again we find our relationship with God – centred on worship – directing our relationship with others – centred on service.

And in the middle, there is prayer!

I suspect that generally, we tend think of prayer as being us speaking to God.

And this is right – for we are called to bring the needs of the world before the throne of grace.

But do not forget that prayer is also listening!

As someone once said, God gave us two ears and one mouth, so, with others and with him, we should spend twice as much time listening as speaking!

Listening to God requires practice – for God can speak to us in many ways.

Sometimes in penny-dropping, 'aha!', moments, it seems as if there is a sudden and direct message for us, perhaps through the words of scripture as we read our Bibles, perhaps through the words of a hymn or song – perhaps even through a sermon!

At other times, it is as though a word, a phrase, an idea, a hunch or intuition, gradually, silently, takes shape within us – we have a slow dawning awareness that God is saying to us.

Perhaps today, the Lord has something to say to individuals here – or to you as a parish, the body of Christ in this place.

Perhaps he has something to say about shaping life for the next century and a half – not that any of us will be here then! But what we do today and tomorrow will influence the course of the years ahead.

Perhaps he has something to say about gratitude and generosity – about receiving and service – about how this Parish can share his gifts of healing and wholeness with those around that need them most.

Well, let me offer you one way to listen intentionally for whatever possibilities the Lord has in store for you.

It is a way that is centred on the Eucharist – and on this double movement of ‘drawing near and receiving’ on the one hand, and then being sent to ‘go in peace to love and serve the Lord’.

As you kneel at the altar rail, consider your two hands, held open before you.

Be conscious that they are open to the Lord.

There they are – ready to receive whatever the Lord will give to you.

Whatever he has in store for you – are you able to be totally open to whatever it might be?

Remember, whatever he has purposed for you, comes with the strengthening power of the bread of life. He will equip you with all you need for the future before you.

And then, be conscious too that your hands are open not only to receive, but to give.

Do you dare to give freely, to hold nothing back, from whatever service the Lord calls you to?

Do not be afraid to do this – for all that we have comes from him; and so whatever God asks you to give, he knows he must first provide! He will not ask of you what you do not have!

Dear people of St Mary's, remember too your patron saint, the mother of Jesus!

Be encouraged by her example.

'I am the Lord's servant' she said 'May it be to me according to your word.'

She dared to say 'Yes' to God.

Today, as we thank God for all that he has done in and through St Mary's over the last century and a half, let us also dare to say 'Yes' to God for the future – for all he has for us to receive, for all he asks that we might give.

Let us celebrate this Eucharist of thanksgiving with dancing hearts, with open hands – and let us receive from the Lord all the riches he has in store for us; and let us share them generously with the world around.

And to God be the glory, now and for ever.

Amen.