

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Community of the Resurrection of our Lord Service
125th Anniversary
25 July 2009

Jn 21:15-19
1 Pet 3:8-16

May I speak in the name of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Dear Mother Zelma, dear Sisters of the Community of the Resurrection of our Lord, dear Friends of the Community – dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is a great privilege and pleasure to be with you today.

Thank you for your invitation to preach and to preside at today's celebration of the Eucharist in this Fellowship Festival service – and the celebration of the 125th anniversary of the founding of the Community.

We have so much to thank God for, today.

From the founding vision of Bishop Allan Becher Webb, and Cecile Isherwood, across a century and a quarter, in Grahamstown and beyond, we have received so very much from the Community.

God has blessed us through you, and for this we thank him.

More than this, we know that the blessing that we have received is just a small part of that grace he has poured upon you, and shared through you, with so many.

To God be the glory, and the praise!

The gospel reading we have just heard is that which is set in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa's lectionary, for the feast of St Peter.

Like St Peter, our desire is faithfully to respond to Jesus' call, 'Follow me.'

And therefore, we, like St Peter, are challenged on two fronts.

The first is love. 'Do you love me?' says Jesus.

Theologians used to set great store by the two different Greek verbs for love, used in the Gospel reading.

Nowadays, I am told, the consensus seems to see them as having essentially the same meaning in the contemporary usage of the day.

Either way, the challenge is the same. Are we prepared to love God, and let him draw us deeper into his love?

Far more than words are at stake.

To live in love is to accept a call to live in vulnerability with another.

For most of us, we particularly experience this in marriage – where we make unconditional commitments not knowing what the future may bring.

It seems to me that the religious life not so different from this as we might imagine.

We should not be surprised that the loving intimacy that is found in the best of marriages is seen as the closest human reflection of the loving intimacy we are called to share with God.

We agree to dismantle the barriers we put up for our own preservation – to live in increasing openness before God, and dependence upon him.

We promise to we will allow him access to every area of our lives – not knowing where the challenges will come; where it will feel like he is a trespasser in our private spaces; where we would rather he kept out and left us to order our lives according to our own choosing.

But God, as some have said, is a persistent seducer – and with tender words of love he urges us to make him welcome, as guest, as Lord, in every area of our lives.

This is the calling of all Christians, but the religious choose to respond to this path of risk and promise in a particularly radical way.

And, more than this, he calls Christians into a similar relationship of mutual vulnerability and dependence with one another, within the body of Christ.

Yet it is one thing to live in vulnerability with a God who is perfect in his loving.

But it is quite something else to share one's life so openly with prickly, difficult, and often down-right wrong human beings, who have the temerity to accuse us also of being prickly, difficult and sometimes down-right wrong!

It has been said that it is far easier to love our enemies, especially when they keep their distance, than it is to love our nearest and dearest!

Every family knows that it is those to whom we are closest with whom we have the greatest frustrations – if you don't believe me, ask my children!!

Yet God creates us to live in families and communities for a purpose – he uses our relationships with each other as part of his refining of us all in Christ-likeness.

It is as if we are rough, sharp-edged stones, all tumbled together in a big drum – rotating round and round, endlessly knocking up against each other, often quite painfully.

But, in that process, the rough edges are gradually knocked off, and worn down, and, over time, we become more and more smoothed and polished – polished so that we can more and more clearly reflect the God of love, and the face of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps we should dare to believe that those who most rub us up the wrong way are among God's greatest gift to us: for it is often from these relationships, and the way God wants to work on us, through them, that we have the most to learn!

Can we, dare we, believe this?

Dare we, as St Peter asks in his letter, repay evil and abuse – or even the angers and frustrations that others provoke in us – with blessing?

Dare we always strive to have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind?

This is the challenge not only for families, and for relationships more generally within the church, but often in very particular ways within religious communities.

Religious communities are not spared the frictions of other human relationships, just because they are founded on lives wholly dedicated to the Lord and his ways.

Let no-one think that community life is an easy option. My experience of communities indicates that the need to work, and keep on working, at relationships is as demanding as in any marriage!

There is a risk of idealised expectations – ‘We are all being holy together and so we should be able to love one another without any problems between us.’

No, this is not the case, and your struggles and frictions are as real as in any marriage or family.

I sometimes think that religious communities experience all that the rest of us experience, but in a particularly stark way – it is as though the struggles of which St Paul writes, of putting off the old life, and taking on the new, are brought into very sharp focus.

How you live shows the rest of us very clearly how God wants to deal with all of us – and we need you to show us how it is that we can cooperate with God, and find his answers to the burdensome life of being ‘only human’.

You who have chosen the religious life live on the margins, where the boundaries between the material world and the spiritual world are particularly thin. Your lives declare the reality of God’s active presence in this world.

This is one way in which you are called to ‘give account of your faith’, as our Epistle reading charged us.

And this brings me to the second area of challenge that comes in answering Jesus’ call to ‘follow me’.

Living in love, with God and with other Christians, we are to share this faith and this love with others – feeding God’s lambs, tending his sheep.

Yet who those sheep may be, for us; and how they need to be fed, we cannot always know in advance.

Even for an order dedicated primarily to pastoral and educational work has certainly found that these two undertakings have been pursued in very, very different ways through all the changes of the last 125 years.

Pastoral care and education can encompass our physical, our spiritual, our emotional and our intellectual needs – and across a whole range of changing circumstances and contexts.

Indeed, we know this, in the way that the Community has expanded into social welfare work, to meet growing needs among those for whom you care.

So promising to feed God's sheep can also feel like an unpredictably unconditional and therefore risky undertaking.

It can feel as if God is calling us to sign a blank cheque, and hand it over to him, not knowing what he will fill in as the amount payable, or what specifically he will ask of us.

And yet we dare to do this too – just as we dare to commit ourselves to sharing in love with him.

Because we know we are in his hands – hands wounded for love of us. And therefore we trust that, though he may ask of us more than we find comfortable, ultimately he will not ask of us what we cannot give.

As our Lord says to St Peter, others 'will take you where you do not wish to go'.

He may demand a great deal of us.

But, as King David acknowledged, and as we so often repeat, 'All things come from you, O Lord, and of your own do we give you' (1 Chron 29:14b)

Therefore, we can also trust that whatever he asks of us, he will himself provide.

I suppose you might say that though we sign a blank cheque, not knowing what amount our Lord will write in, we know the cheque will be honoured, because it is on his account – he is the one who is responsible for the bank balance on which we draw!

Dear Mother Zelma, dear Sisters of the Community, dear Friends of the Community – I wonder whether Bishop Webb and Cecile Isherwood had any idea of all that would lie ahead in the next 125 years.

I am sure that some of what we face today would be way beyond their wildest imaginings.

But God is faithful. As St Peter wrote, ‘the eyes of the Lord are one the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer.’

We do not know what he has in store for the future.

But this is sure – and again I am using the words of St Peter, we should not be intimidated, but in our hearts should sanctify Christ as Lord; and we should live with gentleness and reverence.

So let us love the Lord, and ask him to help us truly love with ALL our hearts, and ALL our souls, and ALL our minds, and ALL our strength; let us love whom he loves, feed his lambs, and tend his sheep.

And most of all, wherever he leads, let us in the coming years answer his voice as he says ‘Follow me’

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

Amen.