

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Diocese of Cape Town Synod, 20-22 August 2009
“Our Vision and Our Mission: God's Faithful People,
Loving and Serving God's Church and God's World”
Daily Homilies

First Homily – Friday 21 August

Mk 12:35-44

³⁵ While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, ‘How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? ³⁶David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.’ ” ³⁷David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?’ And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

³⁸ As he taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’

⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’ (NRSV)

May I speak in the name of the One God, who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of Life. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, last night for my Charge I used verses from Mark’s Gospel that were set for evening prayer. As the passages for today and tomorrow also seemed so apt, I thought we would continue with Mark’s gospel in our daily Eucharists and Bible Studies. After breakfast, we will begin our working days by reading Holy Scripture together, in groups. For it is God’s word which must always be our starting point, in our task of understanding our identity and calling, as the body of Christ for these times, for this place.

Today’s reading begins with Jesus teaching in the Temple. He too is working with Scripture – quoting from the Psalms. But he challenges his hearers to look with fresh eyes at old familiar verses, and not to take for granted the interpretations with which they have brought up. New circumstances – Jesus himself, in this case – require a rethink, even a reinterpretation. It is a reinterpretation that holds onto the truth of the text itself – the verses from the Psalms – but with a whole new understanding of what these might mean in the context of the coming of God’s kingdom.

Though the changes in our circumstances are not as radical as the birth of the Messiah, they are still quite drastic! Are we ready to do a reality check on our reading and interpreting of Scripture, to ensure that how we understand our identity and calling are appropriate to twenty-first century democracy? – and not stuck in the old paradigms of

the apartheid context? What does it mean to be God's faithful people here and now? What does it mean to love and serve God's church, and God's world, here and now?

On the question of identity – of how we see ourselves and how we portray ourselves – the next paragraph of our reading has stark warnings. And here I am, in fancy robes, seated at front! And don't we all like it, when we are recognised in the street, and greeted with respect! But Jesus says we are not to be like the leaders of the world, who value smart suits and VIP reserved places and public applause. This is neither the source of our intrinsic identity, nor how we best communicate the essence of who we are.

Yesterday I spoke about how we love one another within the body of Christ: that is, on the basis of recognising that Christ dwells within one another, and is at work within one another. This is one reason why I want us to spend time in Bible Study together – so we get that opportunity to know one another through more than the labels of which church we attend, what job we do, and so forth. Rather, let the foundation of our relationship with one another depend on recognising a living relationship with Jesus Christ in one another. Then let us build on this foundation in ways that encourage one another to grow in Christlikeness; and let our primary concern be to share this knowledge and love of Christ and his good news with the world around.

The third paragraph of our passage tells the famous story of the widow's mite. The poor widow gives to the temple treasury what, on the face of it, is a tiny sum. Yet this, says Jesus, given by someone poor and cash-strapped, is more significant than all the large sums put in by the rich donors out of their surplus wealth, their disposable income.

Let me draw out two points.

First, everyone can be significant. There is no-one among the baptized who has nothing to offer the life of the church and its mission in God's world. The task for us as Church leaders is to ensure that this is understood with confidence by all the baptised. Every Christian should feel empowered to serve the Lord, and know that, by the power of the Spirit, they can make a significant difference within God's world. One does not have to be rich, or clever, or powerful. Whatever God gives us, we can let him use for his glory and for his kingdom.

And the second point is to underline the importance of good financial stewardship within our stewardship of all the gifts that God gives us. Are we tithing ourselves, as well as teaching that tithing is normative? If it is taken for granted within our churches that we will all tithe, then there will never be any problem with resourcing the vision which we believe Jesus is putting before us.

Of course, as I have said elsewhere (including in the Chrism Mass sermon), my belief is that 'money follows vision'. It is by letting God inspire us with his dreams that we will find ourselves excited enough to make them our own, and motivated to pursue them with all that it takes.

So then, let me sum up the three themes from today's readings:

1. First, reading Scripture with fresh eyes – so we are faithful both to its text and to our context.

2. Second, Christian leadership based not on outward show, but on Christ-like service – and we must learn to recognise it, and encourage it, in one another, and make it the basis of our common life.
3. Third, the confident empowerment of all the baptized; everyone good stewards of the gifts they have, with tithing as our norm as we let God’s vision inspire us.

Let these themes rest in our hearts and minds in the day ahead – in Bible Studies, in Discernment Groups, in discussing the Measures, in debates on Motions around pastoral care and health provisions, and the financial statements – and may these themes help us better discern God’s hand upon our lives.

Amen.

Second Homily – Saturday, 22 August

Mk 13:1-13

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ ²Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’

³When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’ ⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

⁹‘As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. ¹⁰And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. ¹¹When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. ¹²Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; ¹³and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (NRSV)

May I speak in the name of the One God, who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of Life.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, today I want us to reflect further on how we understand the institutional church, and our public role as Anglicans within South Africa. How has our identity and calling changed, with the coming of democracy?

During the struggle, we often faced hostility from the government; yet we were among civil society’s most prominent and respected leaders. For some of us, to become a cleric offered both freedom to act and status that were unavailable in most other walks of life. We were players on the public stage, locally or even nationally.

Democracy is different. In multicultural, pluralist and increasingly secularised societies, differing legitimate perspectives nourish democracy. Individuals are free to pursue

personal fulfilment in whatever way they choose. The faith communities, including the churches, are often regarded as increasingly irrelevant.

How do we ensure that the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, and its Diocese of Cape Town, are more than just a monument to the past? Are we like the disciples looking at the historic edifice of the Temple, and saying 'What large stones and what large buildings!'

Jesus response is a hard one: 'They will all be thrown down.' But he also speaks of 'the beginning of the birthpangs'. How do we allow ourselves to be reborn – painful though it may be – so that the good news of Jesus Christ is proclaimed afresh, and yet still authentically, to this new generation?

This morning I want to reflect on what are appropriate processes for us to address the questions raised in yesterday's homily: what does it mean to be faithful to the texts of Scripture, interpreting and communicating them appropriately within our new contexts, within contemporary culture?

All human life is found within some culture or other, and all faith is expressed within culture – only God stands outside of culture. Our circumstances are a prism, St Paul's looking glass, through which we behold the infinite God who is beyond our finite ability fully to comprehend, and we strive to discern his truths more fully.

Scripture reflects the cultural contexts and understandings of those who wrote, and those they wrote about. Jesus lived in the Jewish culture of the first century – a culture that was influenced by two other cultures: of Roman occupation and of Greek tradition. The way he spoke and taught reflects all three. We also tend to think of St Matthew's Gospel as 'more Jewish', and St Luke's as 'more Greek' in their perspectives.

Our own understanding of Christianity is hugely shaped by the conversations of past generations of God's faithful people with the cultures of their day. Greek philosophy influenced our earliest doctrinal formulations. Later influences include:

- the social and political currents of the Reformation,
- the scientific advances and mindset of the Enlightenment,
- the manners of the Victorians,
- the convictions of the colonialists,
- the experiences of slavers and slaves,
- the many different traditions of African peoples,
- and the views of countless others who passed through, or settled in, the Cape over many centuries.

Every culture has both good and bad, and needs to be measured against the gospel of Christ. What tools shall we bring to bear, in order to work out what is Christ-shaped, and to be embraced and nurtured, and what is to be rejected?

The Anglican way has been to start with scripture, interpreted through tradition and reason – and remember that reason includes reflecting on our experiences of all of life. We have sought to recognise how the eternal truths of God have been expressed through the centuries and cultures in which Scripture was written, and been realised in the life of God's faithful people over two millennia since.

Sometimes the church has had to learn from new cultural movements.

The institutional church argued for centuries that slavery was clearly upheld in Scripture, and, apart from some important individuals, was generally slow to acknowledge that the abolition of slavery was a better reflection of Jesus' promise of liberty for the oppressed.

But sometimes the Church has been badly influenced by culture.

The Churches acquiesced in overturning the centuries-long Biblical prohibition on usury. But charging unrestrained interest on loans, and the greed this has fuelled, are major factors in everything from the global credit crunch to world poverty. There, I think, we got it wrong.

Our Gospel tells us to put our trust not in the large stones of the Temple, but in Jesus as our corner-stone, our touch-stone. Sometimes it helps to ask 'What would Jesus do?' On the other hand, I heard recently about a child who said 'I don't know whether to watch a DVD or play on my play station – and it's no use asking what would Jesus do, because DVDs and play stations weren't invented then!'

So in looking to Jesus, we have to go deeper. What principles might we bring to bear from his teaching? Good news for the poor, freedom to the imprisoned, sight for the blind, liberty to the oppressed – yes, all that. And then there is love for our neighbours, whoever they might be – and, as the parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us, they are not restricted to 'people like us'. Jesus seems to have had a special welcome for the marginalised, the excluded, the stigmatised – welcoming lepers, consorting with drunkards and prostitutes. He condemned religious hypocrisy, especially upholding the letter of the law while disregarding its spirit. Yet he was also uncompromising when it came to the spirit of the law, saying he had come to fulfil, not abolish it.

We might also remember St Paul's advice, to dwell on all that is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent or worthy of praise. Certainly, I hope that in our debate today we will not be rising up against each other, as Jesus warned can happen!

Let us instead draw on Southern African culture's best teaching on debate. Rather than follow a more westernised model of 'for and against', let us rather 'take counsel together' as the people of God, more in the manner of indaba, lekgotla and bosberaad. For we are all members together of the body of Christ. We are all on the same side, all of us 'for' the same thing: discerning God's truth so we may follow Christ faithfully in our Diocese in the years ahead.

So let us pray that we might all find ourselves open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, who will, as Jesus promised, teach us how to speak, as we tackle the challenging issues before us.

Amen.