

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Synod of Bishops: Third Homily**  
**9 September 2009**

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**Luke 6:20-26**

<sup>20</sup>Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said:

‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

<sup>21</sup>‘Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

‘Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

<sup>22</sup>‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup>Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

<sup>24</sup>‘But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

<sup>25</sup>‘Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

‘Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

<sup>26</sup>‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. (NRSV)

In this passage, we read that the poor are blessed ‘because theirs is the kingdom of God’.

As liberation theology puts it, ‘God is “for” everybody, but he has a special option for the poor.’

This is a rather different way of linking God and poverty than taking refuge in some sort of spiritualisation of poverty – blessed are the poor in spirit.

I want to look at this from two angles – first, from the perspective of how we link the spiritual and the material, in our dealings with poverty and its alleviation; and second, in relation to the political lives of our countries.

So then, first the church. There is no doubt that poverty alleviation must be one of our priorities – because it is one of God’s priorities.

Matthew’s gospel is equally clear, when Jesus tells how the sheep and goats will be separated, and the kingdom will be for those who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, tended the sick, and so forth.

Because poverty alleviation is a sign of the coming of the kingdom, it must come bearing the name of its King, its Lord.

By this, I mean that it is not enough for us to take to heart the call to bring good news to the poor, and use it as a spring-board from which we launch ourselves off into social development and upliftment projects of various sorts.

When I was in Grahamstown, too often I saw people catch a vision for helping others, and throwing themselves into the task – and I'm seeing the same now in Cape Town and in the Province.

But they failed to bear in mind the wise advice of Archbishop George Carey – that we must not be so taken up with the work of the Lord, that we lose sight of the Lord of the work.

Too often, people burnt out, exhausting themselves, not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually.

Yesterday I spoke of prayer being the oxygen of our life as Christians. We also need the 'daily bread' of which the Lord's prayer speaks, to sustain us day by day by day – some means of being nourished and fed by God in all that we do.

Now, I am not asking that all of our people who work in social development, capacity building, project delivery and so forth, should be sent off to take qualifications in theology.

But I do want us to teach in ways that help people make the connections between the physical realities of life and the presence of God among us.

'Teach us to discern your hand in all your works' we prayed in the collect just a few weeks ago.

When people can recognise how the practical actions which they pursue are so embedded in the gospel of Christ, they will also know his empowering and sustaining, in the daily details of their work.

And they will be able to communicate the presence of Christ at the heart of the actions, so that, in this way also, the poor shall know the true blessing of the kingdom of God coming near.

Let me end with a brief reflection on my second point – political and public life.

Here success is measured in riches, in plenty, in high living and in status.

'Woe to you' says Jesus 'for you have received your consolation' – and you will find that all of these are ultimately empty.

It is a warning to us not to be seduced by the superficial values and outlooks of new South Africa and the wider world.

And it is also a reassurance, that even though we may now find ourselves less at the centre of political life than before – even a little ignored and marginalised (as by Ray McCauley's new National Interfaith Leaders' Council!) – perhaps it is

better to remain freely independent, on the outside; especially if being an insider means buying in to what will ultimately bring woe, not blessing.

It's a point to ponder!

Amen.