

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
St Cyprian's Retreat, Centenary
13 September 2009

Isaiah 43:1-13
Ps 121
Rev 7:13-17
Luke 12:4-12

May I speak in the name of God, who numbers the very hairs on our heads.

Dear People of God of St Cyprian's, Retreat, may I say again what a joy it is to be with you this morning, and to share in your centenary celebrations.

Once again may I say 'Congratulations' to you all, as we join in thanking God for his faithfulness to you, and all those generations before you, who have made this a place of prayer and worship – a house of God, from which his people have gone out in faithful service to the community around.

Those who founded St Cyprian's, one hundred years ago, could hardly have imagined the turbulence of the times that followed.

The people of this place have certainly been through circumstances that threatened to overwhelm like the rivers, the floods, the fires, of our Old Testament reading.

Yet, with the Prophet Isaiah, we stand and say, we know the voice of the Lord who redeems, who calls us by name, who holds us fast, who keeps us safe, no matter what we have to face in life.

We thank him for his faithfulness to us here, and to this nation of which we are a part.

This afternoon I shall be at the Cathedral, for a special service to mark the 20th anniversary of the Peace March: some 30,000 people gathering to say 'enough is enough – stop the killing'.

And somehow it seemed to mark a turning point.

With the eyes of faith, we now look back and see God at work, through the courage of Archbishop Tutu, and the Mayor Gordon Oliver, who chose to stand up and support him in a new and very visible way, and all those thousands who took trains and busses to the city centre to stand up and be counted.

I am sure some of you were there and remember that day still.

How much we have to thank God for!

How things have changed since them!

But our God is still the same, and he still calls us to a life of 'worship, witness and service', as it says in our Prayer Book, in the Service of Confirmation.

So this morning I want to reflect a little on what worship, witness and service might mean for the people of St Cyprian's today, as one century closes and another opens up before you.

There are new opportunities – the opportunities of democracy and freedom.

But there are new challenges –

- transformation still not complete;
- economic inequality and the effects of the credit crunch;
- the struggle with HIV and AIDS;
- the scourge of tik and of alcohol abuse;
- our fears for our children, their well-being and their safety;
- problems in the home – domestic violence, and the effort to sustain healthy, happy, stable, family life;
- and the ever-changing face of crime.

Our starting point is the starting point for the whole of our lives – worship, or, more broadly put, our relationship with God, our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer.

He is not some distant deity, sitting on a cloud far away, looking down on us from a great height.

No, he is the God who is intimately involved with his children, whom he loves.

Each one of us – each one of you – is created by him to be his precious and beloved daughter or son. Each one of you is unique and special. Each one of you matters – he cares about you, and he calls you by name, saying ‘Do not be afraid. You are mine.’

Worship begins when we can say ‘Yes’ to God – ‘Yes, I am yours – and I trust myself to you.’

Worship begins when we can close our eyes, let out a deep sigh – allowing ourselves to relax, and know ourselves held in the palm of God’s loving hand.

Worship begins when we ‘let go, and let God’ – when all we do is allow God to love us, and allow ourselves to feel God’s love.

In the last couple of days it really has begun to feel as if spring is finally on the way.

Have you had a chance just to pause, and bask in the warmth of the sunshine?

God wants us to take the time to bask in the warm sunshine of his love for us!

This is the source of worship: because just as the spring warmth prompts new growth, flowering and flourishing – so God’s love prompts the growth and flowering and flourishing of our love for him, our trust in him, our faith in him, our following him.

When you come to church, when you sit in the service, when you listen to the sermon – just take a moment to remember that you are surrounded by the sunshine of his love.

And take a moment to say ‘Yes’ to his promise of new life within you – and you will be surprised at the difference it makes.

The same is true when you are at home – as you pray, as you read your Bible. Expect the Bible to speak to you, the living word of God – expect it to relate to the real issues of your life.

Perhaps you need reassurance; perhaps you need encouragement; perhaps you need challenge; perhaps you need to be prompted to make some changes!

Read your Bible, with a listening mind, expecting God to speak to you – and you will find that he does.

Like any other relationship, the more we spend quality time with God, the closer we grow to one another – the more we grow closer to Jesus, closer to the people he calls us to be, closer to the lives of witness and service, to which he calls us.

Preparing to come here today, I discovered this quote from a letter of St Cyprian. He wrote:

‘When speaking of God, our master, the absolute sincerity of what we say will communicate to others not by our eloquence but by the substance of our lives’.

When it comes to witnessing – which is, in a nutshell, sharing the truth about God and his love with his world – when it comes to witnessing, actions speak louder than words.

When people see our lives reflecting a living relationship of love with God, this is what will best communicate the good news of Jesus Christ.

Then the words can fill in the detail of the picture they are already beginning to see!

And while, these days, very few of us are likely to be hauled up before hostile authorities because of our faith, the promise of Jesus remains the same.

As we stay close to him, as we ‘abide in his love’ (as we are told in John’s gospel), as we allow the Holy Spirit to dwell within us – then, when we are asked about our faith, we will find we have the right words overflowing from us.

And then comes service.

The heart of service also lies with our relationship with God.

Jesus tells the crowds that each one of them, every single individual, is more valuable than the flocks of sparrows, who also gather in numbers wherever something interesting is going on!

God knows about every single sparrow – and God knows about every single person in our community. God knows the number of hairs on every head – and every person is valued, precious, beloved.

Now the challenge is not just to allow God to love us with that overwhelming love and compassion – but to allow his overwhelming love and compassion flow through us to those around us.

Perhaps you don't feel much love for the person begging at the robots, or sorting through your dustbin, or driving down the street late at night with their boom box music pumping out of the car windows on full volume – to say nothing of the one who tries to sell your kids tik, or steal your stuff.

But the good news is this – 'We love because God first loved us' as St John reminds us in his first letter (1 Jn 4:19).

Letting ourselves experience the love of God is the key to having that love flow through our lives to others.

Only as we allow God's compassion to fill us, will we truly be filled with compassion for others.

And Godly compassion will guide our actions. Godly compassion is not about putting up with anything – often Godly compassion is about being tough, setting boundaries, standing up and saying 'enough is enough'.

But Godly compassion saves us from being fuelled by anger, by revenge, by despair – it is a bottomless well on which we can draw.

So this is God's promise for St Cyprian's, as you embark on the second century of a life of worship, witness and service.

Everything starts with God and his unendingly faithful love.

He does not promise us an easy life – rivers and floods and fires of various sorts that we cannot predict will inevitably come our way.

But he who calls us by name will see us safely through.

And he will pour his love into our lives, so that it can flow into the lives of others, and into the life of the community around us.

It is God, and the power of his love within us, that makes all the difference.

St Cyprian knew this.

He wrote:

All our power is of God: I repeat, it is of God. From God we receive the gift of life and strength. By the power derived from God we are able, while still living in this world, to glimpse the things of eternity.

Dear people of St Cyprian's Church – hold fast to this vision from your patron saint.

We may struggle in this life – but already, God offers us a glimpse of eternity.

He desires to open our eyes, so that our hearts and minds may be kept in the growing knowledge of his love.

And he calls us to share this glimpse, this hope, this sure and certain promise, with one another, and with his world.

So may God continue to bless you, and may you continue to shine as his lights in the world – here in Retreat, and wherever life takes you.

To him be the glory and the praise, now and for ever.

Amen