

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Ash Wednesday, St George's Cathedral**  
**17 February 2010**

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May I speak in the name of God the Father, who reconciles us to himself through the Son, and renews his right Spirit within us. Amen.

Lent may be summed up in the words with which we receive the ash on our foreheads 'Turn away from sin, and believe the good news.'

Sin, we know – and God knows too – is part of the human condition, and at times is all too evident.

Our newspapers overflow with the sexual indiscretions of our country's leaders – to say nothing of assertions of corruption and abuse of power.

This behaviour is not acceptable. The Synod of Bishops made this clear in a statement we issued at the end of our meeting last week.

Those we elect to serve our nation should lead through good example, and put the needs of others before narrow self-interest.

Promiscuity, adultery and sexual exploitation are wrong in every culture; so are dishonesty and fraud. So too is the denial of human rights – whether undermining democracy or refusing women equality before the law, as happens in some countries of our Church's Province, or in the criminalisation and persecution of gay people, as has been proposed in Uganda – all, again, matters that the Synod of Bishops has condemned.

Yet it is easy enough to point fingers.

Jesus warns against merely condemning others, like the hypocrites, and then washing our hands of this society to which we belong.

Rather, he calls us to action, to become part of the solution.

We are to take up the ministry of reconciliation – participating in God's reconciling of the world to himself through Jesus Christ.

By his death on the cross, Jesus bridges the gap between the messy reality of human failings, and the glory of God himself.

The prophet Joel speaks of the priests similarly bridging the gap: standing 'between the vestibule and the altar' – between the world outside and the holy place of offering to God.

This is precisely where Jesus enacts reconciliation.

In his incarnation, fully human, he is fully part of the world outside the vestibule – and yet he also the perfect lamb of God, the acceptable sacrifice upon the altar.

All believers share in the holy priesthood of Jesus, as members of the body of Christ. We are also to inhabit this space between vestibule and altar.

We live with one foot in the world, one foot in the kingdom of heaven.

At Lent we particularly recognise this tension of being sinners, yet redeemed.

We face it in two ways.

First, we weep, as the priests of the Old Testament were called upon to weep. We weep at our own failings, and we weep at the failings of our society, our nation. We lament and we repent.

We also weep as Jesus wept when he looked down on Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, and saw the pains, the brokenness and weaknesses of its inhabitants – yearning to take them under his wing, like a mother hen shelters her chicks.

For it is not our task to condemn. We remember that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him (John 3:17).

Therefore, second, we face Lent committing ourselves to turn from sin and to believe the good news – the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

In doing this, we model what it means to turn towards the redemption which Jesus offers.

We become ministers of reconciliation by encouraging others to follow us in living – not with promiscuity or corruption – but in pursuing faithfulness, trustworthiness, honesty, generosity of spirit.

We demonstrate the morals, the values, the ethics, we'd like to see upheld, in every relationship – whether personal, professional or political.

We follow Jesus in bringing good news to the poor, feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, and ministering to the needy.

So let me end by challenging you to adopt some specific action as a minister of reconciliation this Lent.

Perhaps you can build, or deepen, a relationship with someone from a different background from you – helping weave and strengthen the fabric of our historically divided society.

Perhaps you can make a donation to Haiti or some other needy cause.

Perhaps you can join a project run by the Cathedral or give generously to it; give up chocolates, like me, or using your iPod, and give the money saved to a needy NGO or environmental group; or become involved in a local political issue.

Yes, pray and fast this Lent – that is the starting point. And do use the Cathedral's boxes for what you save through your Lenten disciplines. But also act.

As Gandhi said, 'Be the change you want to see in the world'.

As Scripture says, be a minister of reconciliation.

Amen.