

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Sermon at St Cyprian's Church, Sharpeville
50th Anniversary of Sharpeville Shootings
21 March 2010

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C: Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:8-14; John 8:1-11

Lord Jesus Christ, word of God made flesh – take these words and speak through them, take our minds and speak to them, and take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. Amen

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear people of God of St Cyprian's, Sharpeville, let me say again how glad I am to be here.

Thank you, Archdeacon and Wardens, for your invitation. Thank you to all of you for the warm welcome you have given me – especially Mrs Dinkabogile, the hospitality team, and those who have taken care of security.

Today of all days, I am glad to be with you – though, as you will have seen on your way to church today, I am not the only visitor to Sharpeville this morning, with everyone up to the Acting President coming here!

Fifty years ago today, events took place only a few hundred metres from where we now stand – and just a few metres from my mother's and grandparents' home at 4121 Rooi, where I later spent my summer holidays - events which proved to be a significant landmark in the opposition to, and eventual downfall of, apartheid.

Fifty years on, politicians and TV cameras again focus their gaze upon Sharpeville. Fine words will be spoken, rallying calls will be issued – and then what?

Most of us who have come visiting today will leave. I myself am flying to the Netherlands tonight, to take part in an international conference on the response of faith communities to HIV and AIDS – for which I ask your prayers.

But what do the events of 50 years ago mean to those of you who will be here tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that?

What of the Sharpeville of today, and the issues which the community faces, here and now?

Let me dare to address these questions – claiming at least some identification with Sharpeville, as my late grandmother's home; the place where my late mother grew up; and where the family still owns a house.

And let me use the readings set for today, the fifth Sunday in Lent, as the lens through which to look at events of the past and their impact upon the challenges of today.

Let me begin with words from our Old Testament Lesson, from the Prophet Isaiah.

'Thus says the Lord ... Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.'

Well, on the face of it this might seem inappropriate for us today.

Is God telling us to forget what happened here? Is he saying we should live as though those traumatic events of 1960 never took place?

No, that is not quite the message. There is something else going on in what he has to say to us here.

Let us look at how the verses continue.

The Lord says, 'I am about to do a new thing.'

We are not to be trapped in the past.

The way we relate to the past, the way we understand it, must be through the eyes of this 'new thing' that God does among his people.

The 'new thing' that is the hall-mark of God at work among us, is the way he is always bringing about new life, especially where there appears to be none.

This is what we find as the words of the Lord continue, in our Isaiah passage:

'I am about to do a new thing: now it springs forth – do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.'

In the barrenness of a wilderness he makes a way. We are not left, lost and abandoned, in a featureless wasteland. Instead, he shows us a route forward.

We are not left, thirsty in the desert – he will provide rivers for refreshment.

And this refreshment is 'to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself, so that they might declare my praise'.

God cares for his people, whom he loves, he cherishes – whom he knows by name, every single one of us.

It is out of love for us that he will not leave us in circumstances where we feel lost and abandoned in a wilderness, dying of need in a barren desert.

His hand of love will reach out to us – and bring us a direction forwards; and refreshment; and, most of all, the promise of life at work where we perhaps can see only death.

We see this promise fulfilled most completely, of course, in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ, God takes on human form, becoming incarnate – experiencing for himself what it means to 'live with skin on'.

Our God knows what it is like to suffer as a human being – to suffer in our bodies, in our minds, in our hearts, in our memories.

Our God knows what it is like to go through oppression, rejection, torment; to live with emotional anguish and physical pain.

Our God knows what it is like to realise that we are dying.

Our God knows what it is like to experience death.

But the message of God is that death is not the last word.

Death does not have the final say.

Death does not triumph, in the ultimate analysis.

Because Jesus, who died, was raised to new life.

And we, who are baptised into his death, were also baptised into his resurrection.

This is why, in two weeks' time, on Easter Sunday, we shall join in saying 'Alleluia, Christ is risen – we are risen.'

Earlier this month I was in Haiti. It is an experience I can hardly begin to describe. The extent of the death and destruction that we saw was beyond imagining.

It is estimated that a quarter of a million people lost their lives. That figure is likely to rise, and the true number will never be known with any precision.

All over the city there are mass graves – but, worse than this, countless bodies remain trapped in fallen buildings that are too unstable to enter or even, at this point, pull down. And when you walk by, you can smell that this is so.

And yet, God is there, doing his 'new thing'.

I spent time with Bishop Jean-Zaché Duracin, the Anglican Bishop in Haiti.

Seventeen years of work in his Diocese is largely gone: schools, colleges, seminary – collapsed; clergy and ordinands, teachers and learners, church-workers and parishioners – killed and injured.

He himself has lost his house, completely flattened; his possessions are totally destroyed; his car was crushed like a sandwich on the ground; his wife was seriously injured and evacuated to the United States for treatment.

As he wept, pointing to all he had lost, he said 'We still have to sing alleluia, for in the midst of this, Christ is risen.'

This is the message he is sharing with all his people, so they can share it with others. In the midst of death, Christ still brings life.

Therefore we come to God, with all the burdens of pain, sadness, sorrow and grief.

We bring them before the throne of grace, to the one who understands what it is to be human and to suffer.

We do not have to pretend that suffering doesn't matter. We can be honest that it touches us to the very depths of our being.

And then we find that loving and compassionate hands – hands that still bear the scars of the crucifixion – reach out to us, and touch us tenderly.

They lift the weight of the burdens that weigh us down.

They hold refreshment to our lips.

They wipe away our tears.

And they take hold of our hands, and lead us on the way ahead, saying 'I will never leave you or forsake you – I am with you always to the end of time.'

As we feel their touch, we also know that these same tender hands of love have received those who are dear to us, who have passed from us in death.

Yes, we must grieve those whom we have lost – yet we do so, knowing that they are now safe with the one who has conquered death; and from whose right hand, as the Psalmist says, flow delights for evermore (Ps 16:11).

'Do not remember the past' says the Lord – do not dwell in the past, do not be trapped in the past.

But look at the past with new eyes – with the eyes of Jesus Christ, who brings new life into every situation, who redeems and transforms.

As St Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, 'In all things, God works for God, for those who love God, whom he has called, according to his purpose' (Rom 8:28).

The events of Sharpeville, 50 years ago, are a living testimony to the truth of this promise.

What happened that day was terrible – over 180 injured and 69 people left dead, the youngest 12, the oldest 57, and with an average age of 30 – and after a peaceful protest. Lives were lost, or shattered for ever.

This we must not forget.

Yet it was also a turning point, a milestone, on the journey towards justice, towards freedom from oppression, towards opportunity for everyone.

Justice, freedom from oppression, opportunity for everyone are central to the purposes of God.

They are at the heart of the ‘good news for the poor’ which Jesus tells us he came to bring.

They are at the heart of what God’s people, everywhere, in every generation, are called to proclaim and to pursue.

It does not matter what church you go to, or what political party you support.

What matters is whether you proclaim and pursue the purposes of God – of justice, freedom, equality, and good news for the poor.

This was true of life in Sharpeville, and across South Africa, fifty years ago.

It remains true of life in Sharpeville, and across South Africa, today.

Jesus warns his disciples about forming cliques, and wanting to control how other people further his good news for all humanity.

They complain that someone who is ‘not of our group’ is casting out demons in Jesus’ name. ‘We told him to stop, because he was not one of us’ we read in St Mark’s gospel (Mk 9:40).

But Jesus responds ‘Do not stop him ... for whoever is not against us is for us.’

This must be the touchstone for today.

It is not a question of which group you belong to; whether you are ‘one of us’ or ‘one of them’.

What matters is whether you are for Jesus Christ, and for the purposes of God for the peace and well-being of all his children in his world.

This is what God asks of us, and this is what God honours, when we dare to live our lives this way.

As we pursue God's purposes, he will work in us and through us, to ensure those purposes are furthered and achieved.

In our Epistle reading, we heard how St Paul tells the Philippians that he has made Jesus Christ the central focus of his life.

He says 'I regard everything as loss, because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ as my Lord.'

Indeed, he gets quite carried away, with a rhetorical style that would put any politician of today in the shade!

He says 'I regard [all other things] as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.'

Nothing matters to St Paul as much as Jesus – and of living life as Jesus would have him live, following Jesus' own example, living according to Jesus' own righteousness – 'the righteousness of God, based on faith'.

This can help us in knowing how best to bring about justice and bring good news to the poor.

It does not help us, it does not help others, if our actions are no better than those we oppose.

This is not to say that we should be passive and weak – no, we must stand up and be counted, and we must raise our voices, for what is right and good and true and honest and just and fair.

In a democratic system, under one of the best Constitutions in the world, we must use all democratic and constitutional avenues open to us.

I will be using just these avenues in the next few months to express two particular concerns.

The first is the question of how NERSA can raise electricity tariffs for domestic and most other consumers – while Eskom has secret

'sweetheart' arrangements behind our backs with major companies. Not only do they receive energy at favoured rates, they seem to be paying less than the electricity actually costs – and the rest of us are paying for this.

The second relates to allegations of the abuse of both the principle and the letter of BEE regulations, designed to redress the economic inequities of the apartheid era. There are reports which suggest that the ruling party, through Chancellor House and its stake in Hitachi, stands to receive vast sums, perhaps billions, in Eskom's construction of new power stations.

The legality of this, if true, is certainly suspect at best. More than this, it is a fundamental abuse of all that good governance entails. It is completely unacceptable, and a blatant abuse of power, if government is both referee and player in such games of wheeler dealing, acting for its own self-interest.

I feel it is my responsibility to use the opportunities the office of Archbishop gives me, to be God's instrument for justice, especially economic freedom and equal opportunity for all, and not merely the well-connected few, in these matters.

Let us return again to the words of the prophet Isaiah.

The Lord promises us a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, drink for his people.

If we rely on him, we will find his right way forward, we will find his refreshment for us – and of course, here we think of Jesus, who is for us the water of life, promising that if we drink of him, we will never thirst.

This is the way to find, as St Paul found, the power of the resurrection at work within our own lives, and the life of our families, our communities.

This is true for us in Sharpeville.

It is true for us as we look back to the past, seeing the tragedy through the eyes of our compassionate saviour.

It is true for us today, with all the challenges of the political landscape, of municipal failings and flawed governance, of inadequacies in service delivery.

And it is true for the people of Haiti, who dare to lament the death and devastation they experience, with hope in their hearts.

So let me end by summing up what I have been saying.

God's calling to his people, always and everywhere, is to be true followers of Jesus Christ, who came to 'bring good news to the poor and liberty to the oppressed'.

This is equally true: whether in the face of the political impoverishment and oppression of the past; or in relation to contemporary economic hardships and crises of service delivery today.

It does not matter whether we are priests or politicians or people just going about our every-day life.

What matters is that all those who strove in the past, and who now strive for God's purposes of justice, freedom, equality, peace, good news for the poor, should receive our honour and recognition – they certainly are acknowledged in the sight of God.

And we should follow in their footsteps, in what we strive for, and the way we strive for it – following the example of God in Jesus Christ, who offers us life wherever death appears to be at work.

So let us commit ourselves to this course, saying with St Paul, 'Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.'

May he bless us in this, and make us a blessing to others.

Amen