

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Manche Masemola Pilgrimage
‘Pilgrims and Witnesses’

1 August 2010

Lk 24:45-49: Then Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’

May I speak in the name of our Lord and Saviour, who calls us all to ‘Follow me’ on the pilgrim journey of life. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may I say again what a delight it is to be with you today.

Thank you, Bishop Martin; thank you Revd Olive [Senyatsi] Coordinator of the Organising Committee, and thank you to everyone who has worked with you, for all that has been done in preparation for this wonderful day.

I also want to express our deep gratitude to Kgosi, for giving us this land. [*If present* - Thank you, sir.] Let me also acknowledge the presence of Kgosi Makgoba – it is good to have you with us, sir.

I have been reflecting a lot on the meaning of pilgrimage, as I prepared to travel to the Diocese of St Mark the Evangelist.

In a way, this has also been a pilgrim journey: travelling from Cape Town to Johannesburg, from Johannesburg to Polokwane, from Polokwane to Sekhukhuneland.

I was very conscious that I was not journeying like a business traveller, nor like a tourist – though the aeroplanes were full of both.

And now we are here neither to do business, nor as tourists.

The travelling of pilgrims is a very different sort of travelling.

We make a physical journey, an outer journey, to help us make progress towards our real goal, which is our inner journey, a spiritual journey.

The spiritual journey we seek is to walk the path that leads us closer to Jesus.

You may remember the famous prayer that asks:
'Day by day, dear Lord, for these three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, day by day.'

Pilgrimage is one way of helping us achieve this prayer.

We have set out on this day's journey, because we yearn to be nearer in every way to Jesus, our beloved Lord and Saviour, and nearer to the life he calls us to lead.

First, we have come, wanting to see him more clearly.

We have come here, not because God is more present here than anywhere else – no, God is Lord of the whole earth, and to be found everywhere.

But we come to see more clearly how, in this place, God met the young girl, Manche Masemola, in a very special way.

At each of the seven stations, we have listened to Manche's story.

We have learnt about the gift of faith which she received from God.

We have learnt about her commitment to respond to his call, and to persist in prayer.

We have learnt about the courage to stay faithful to her Lord

And we have learnt how her death became a source of life – how many people saw the power of God at work in Manche, and trusted him to be their Saviour too.

By coming here, and remembering what happened here, we see how God can work in our lives too.

We see the power of God to bring good out of evil.

Some of you know the sePedi proverb, 'Bohlale bo tswa lebadings' – wisdom comes from a scar – good things can come from a bad experience.

By God's grace, this is certainly so!

We see the power of God to offer forgiveness to those who repent, and to bring new beginnings.

We see the power of God to challenge and change communities.

Seeing God more clearly in this way, prompts us to love God more dearly.

For we cannot listen to Manche's story, without having our hearts touched, and our spirits stirred.

We need this – because often we cope with the difficulties of life through becoming 'tough', putting on a hard shell, and setting the pains of life to one side.

But by coming here, we leave at home our own burdens, and our own ways of coping, as we listen again to the story of how God touched Manche's life.

And we find God breaks open our hard shells, and touches us where we are tender.

We become tender to the story of this young girl, and her encounter with a God who is so precious to her, so beloved, that she will risk her life for him.

We become open to the Lord's love poured into our lives too – we can feel how precious we are to him.

And in turn we also grow in loving him as our beloved too.

More than this, he makes us tender to others – so we can grow in feeling the love that he has towards them also.

God in his love challenges us to be more loving.

So, for example he challenges us to ensure that our young women are protected, and safe – free to worship, free to live their lives without threat of violence, whether from strangers or even from those within their own homes.

When we love God more dearly, he leads us to love others more dearly also.

Alala moeng gobane motla-le-kgomo ga a tsejbe (Prepare bedding for an unknown visitor, because you never know who may bring a cow.) Be hospitable to strangers, says the proverb, because you never know when they may in turn be able to help you.

Scripture says we should be hospitable to others, not because of what we might get out of it, but because God loves them too – and calls us to love them as ourselves.

This is the love we are challenged to show to the many needy ‘strangers’ in our midst – finding refuge from the continuing terrible times in Zimbabwe.

This is the love that the ‘Daughters of Mary’ showed, both at the hospital and to the orphans who came into their care.

God calls his church to be channels of his love, in practical action.

Desiring and daring to follow God more nearly means letting God change our lives – not only on our inner journey, but in our outer behaviour too.

For at the end of a pilgrimage, though we return home, we do not just go back to pick up life where we left off.

We go back changed, altered, by what we have experienced here – our experience of God in action in Manche’s life, the same God ready to act in our lives.

Therefore we go home, ready to continue on the longer pilgrim journey of following Jesus for the rest of our lives.

This means becoming more like him, more Christ-like, in all we say and do.

This is what it means to be a witness – which, in the Greek of the New Testament, is the same word as martyr.

A witness is someone who testifies to what they believe, and sticks by what they believe – in words, in actions, in holding to this truth even at the cost of their lives.

As we heard in St Luke’s gospel, the women who encountered the two young men – the two angels – in dazzling white in the empty tomb were sent as witnesses to tell the apostles.

And Jesus himself said ‘You are my witnesses’ to his disciples in the last lesson we just heard from the Gospel of St Luke.

Manche was Jesus’ witness and his martyr, in her life and in her death.

And we are to be his witnesses too, in the way we live our lives – witnesses of his power at work in the life and death of Manche Masemola.

We are also challenged to be open to see him at work in the young people within our Churches.

Sometimes we say 'Mahlaku a maswa a ema ka a matala' – newly cut branches in a kraal lean against the older ones. And yes, in many areas of life, young people are indeed best guided by the older generation.

But at the same time, Manche's story reminds us of the truth of another saying., 'Ngwetsi ye ntshwa e feela le ka mafuri morago' – a new bride sweeps even the back yard. Sometimes we need to learn from the energy and commitment of those who are young in years, and young in the faith.

We heard the story of Jesus as a young boy in the Temple at Jerusalem, speaking with a wisdom beyond his years. God can still speak through the young, if they, like Jesus himself, like Manche, keep close to him in prayer.

And where relationships within families have broken down, God can bring about new beginnings. We heard how Manche's own mother, finally found Christian faith – finally found the love that Jesus had for her, despite what had happened.

She found the forgiveness that he offered freely, even for the murder of her own daughter – just as he sought it for those who crucified him (as we heard in the readings).

Therefore we can be confident that there is no division within families that is too great for God's healing love.

Let us take courage from this, in our own families, in our own communities.

And let us share this healing promise with those around us – spreading the good news of his gospel with the people of Sekhukhuneland, and across the Diocese.

For we journey as pilgrims, and live as Christ's witnesses, not only as individuals, but also together as God's people, his church, the body of Christ.

I am reminded of one of my very favourite sePedi sayings: Mphiri o tee ntoo ga o lle – a single bangle can make no sound – it is together that we make beautiful music; together we can make a real difference so that the community around us must wake up and take notice!

We are a pilgrim people – witnesses to Christ, as we journey through life with our hand in his, and inviting others to join us.

And, finally, on days when the journey is hard, when the path is steep and full of rocks and stones – when it is difficult to see Jesus clearly, to love him dearly, to follow him nearly – then he has one more promise for us.

It comes from the last of our readings.

It is his promise to all his disciples – to all who are called to be his witnesses.

Because it is not in our own strength that we journey, or give testimony.

There is another strength on which we can draw – the strength that helped Manche hold fast, even when her life was threatened.

Jesus promised ‘stay, until you have been clothed with power from on high.’

So let us also rest in him – and find in him the power we need, to live faithfully the pilgrim life to which he called Manche, and to which he calls each one of us.

And may he bless you, and make you a blessing to others.

Amen.