

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Homily at Taxi-Train Crash Site
29 August 2010

May I speak in the name of God our Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.

Dear friends, there are times and places where it seems that no words, no actions, are ever going to be adequate. Today, in this place, is one of these occasions. We do not know what to do, we do not know what to say – but we come here, because we must.

We come here to honour those who died. We come here to weep with those who weep, to mourn with those who mourn, to offer what love and comfort and strength we can – even as we recognise how inadequate this is. We come here, faced with the overwhelming mysteries of life and death, that are beyond our ability fully to comprehend. We come here feeling that we are standing on holy ground, because here young, beautiful lives – lives full of hope and promise – were needlessly cut short. We come here, and stand before God, with our questions, our grief, our anger, our numbness, our disbelief that something so tragic could actually happen.

We come because we know the truth of the words of the prophet Jeremiah, who wrote: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah’ says the Lord, ‘lamentation and bitter weeping: Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children because they are no more’ (Jer 31:15). Rachel was the mother of the nation – her inconsolable weeping was the weeping of every mother, every father, every grandparent, aunt, uncle, brother, sister, cousin, friend, who had lost a child they loved. Her weeping is the weeping of every person in this country whose heart has been touched by this week’s tragedy.

We stand before God and we weep. And, just as the Lord heard the voice of Rachel, we know he hears our voices too. Our voice is heard by our Father in heaven, who watched as his own son died on the cross. Our voice is heard by Jesus, who wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus; and who faced death so we need not face it alone; and so that the terrible doorway of death could become the gateway to life beyond. Our voice is heard by the Holy Spirit, who prays within us in sighs and groans, when our own words fail us. We have a God who listens, who hears, who knows what it is to wrestle with the impossible pains of death and bereavement.

The Bible promises that one day, in heaven, he will wipe away our tears – but not yet. For now, for us here on earth, it is Jesus’ words of the Sermon on the Mount, that we must hear: ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.’ God does not belittle the enormity of this tragedy. He

does not ask us to pretend that it is all for the best, when inside our sore hearts are crying out. 'Weep' says God. 'Mourn' says God. 'Be honest about your pain, your loss, your sorrow, your sadness. Come to me with your grief, and even the bitterness and anger in your hearts.' For it is as we open ourselves up to these emotions within us, that we open ourselves up to God – to receive his strength, his comfort – and, in due time, his healing and his encouragement to go on, and go forward. He says to us that we need to take our mourning seriously – to acknowledge how much we loved, to acknowledge how much we have lost.

For the gift of life is precious – it is God's miracle. And he shares our distress that these lives were lost in such a tragic way. So our hearts go out to all of you who have lost a child. With sadness we remember each one: Liezel, Nadine, Michaelin, Jody, Cody, Jason, Reece, Nolan, Jean Pierre and Jade. We commend each one into God's eternal care. We ask him to enfold them in his arms of love, and to give them his everlasting peace and joy. We pray also for their families, their friends, and all who mourn their deaths. For you, we ask for God's comfort and strength to surround you and uphold you.

We pray for the other children who were in the crash: Jamie-Lee, Emilio, Kyle, and Luciano. We pray for their physical recovery – and for their emotional recovery from the trauma they have experienced. We pray too for everyone else who was caught up in the crash – especially the train driver, who was powerless to stop the collision.

And we pray for our own nation – we weep as Rachel wept, that we are a country where such a thing can happen: because too many of us take needless risks; because too many of us think we know better than the rules of the road; because too many of us put ourselves first, and fail to consider others. So today, we pray for justice to be done – for those who bear responsibility to face the consequences of their actions: and if this means prosecution and sentencing of the driver, then so be it. We pray with him, we pray with his family – but we must let the law take its course.

And we also ask for God to have mercy on South Africa – and to give all of us the grace, the courage, the commitment, to learn from this tragedy; to change our ways; to become a nation of people who care for one another; who treat every human person with respect; who act with compassion; who are part of the solutions, not part of the problems of our lives; and who understand the ethos of serving others, whether in our attitudes and manners, or in our professional lives as public servants.

In this light, we thank God for those doctors and nurses, the hospital staff and emergency services, who, despite struggling for a fair wage, were nonetheless at their posts and who treated the injured. And we thank God for the educators and school staff, who equally strive for a just salary, yet

were nonetheless in the schools, supporting the class-mates of those who were killed and injured.

Therefore I can only urge all others in the public sector across the country to follow their example – to return to work, even as you continue to argue for equitable pay, and to ensure that necessary health services, necessary educational services, are sustained. No individual's life or health, no young person's future, should be put in jeopardy – no matter how just the pay dispute.

Let me also say thank you today to everyone who has come to show support, or who has sent messages of condolence. We thank Pastor Barend, and the other clergy and faith leaders for their supportive presence; as well as Minister Trevor Manuel, Mayor Dan Plato, and Premier Helen Zille. My prayer is that the presence of everyone here today, and the messages you bring, will be a source of comfort and strength to the bereaved and the wider community as you mourn. I pray that this will help ease the pain and assist the family members and friends to feel the transforming love and comfort of Jesus Christ.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear people of God, let me return to last Wednesday's tragic events, and how we go forward from here. Earlier I quoted words from the prophet Jeremiah, of Rachel and her inconsolable weeping. Yet one day, weeping must come to an end. God's promise is for strength to go forward. The very next verse in the Bible says this: 'Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears ... for there is hope for your future, says the Lord.'

And so, even in the depths of our grief, we entrust ourselves to the Lord, and ask him to let the light of hope shine in our lives. Today it may be little more than a small candle, shining in great darkness. But the promise of God is that the darkness can never put it out. May he shine in your hearts and mine, today, tomorrow and always, and may we dare to be his lights in our world. Amen.