

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Diocese of Cape Town – Mothers’ Union Lady Day Service
26 March 2011

Isaiah 7:10-14
Romans 5:12-17
Luke 1:26-38

May I speak in the name of God – to whose service we are all called. Amen. Dear people of God, dear sisters and brothers in Christ, dear members of the Diocese of Cape Town Mothers’ Union – I want to recall the angel’s greeting in Luke’s gospel - ‘Greetings, favoured ones! The Lord is with you!’ Wow - after three years of trying, it’s possible for me to be at the Lady Day service! Let me express my warm thanks to all those involved with this service – both from the side of the Cathedral, as well as from the side of the Mothers’ Union – and especially to our President, Mrs Onica Louw-Msutu, for all she has done, not only for today, but throughout the last year. Thanks also to your Executive for their part.

Once again we are here to celebrate the Feast of the Annunciation – the visitation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, who dared to say Yes to God. Mary said Yes, so that God’s good purposes for humanity might find expression and fulfilment through her. Or, to use the words of our Gospel reading, and the theme of today’s service, she said ‘I am the Servant of the Lord’.

Today I want to reflect on what it means to say ‘I am the Servant of the Lord’. What does it mean for us as members of the Mothers’ Union? And what does it mean for us in South Africa in 2011 – especially as we face local elections, just under eight weeks away.

The Mothers’ Union was established to support women in the demanding role of motherhood, and for the wider promotion of family life. In its early years, that focus tended to be on the family within the home, in the domestic arena. But today that focus goes far wider – for mothers can be found in every walk of life, and across all of society. I’d like to cite an example. Yesterday on Constitutional Hill I unveiled a memorial for the ‘class of 1994’ – the women in the first Parliament of our democratic South Africa. And as I looked around at all the women there I saw members of the Mothers’ Union who were in Parliament, who were politicians, in business and leaders in community organizations. God’s challenge to you, the Mothers’ Union, is to be his servants in every walk of life, and across all of society, so that everywhere, God’s good purposes for humanity might find expression and fulfilment through us.

For there is nowhere in our city, our country, where the Mothers’ Union does not have an interest – nowhere, where God is not concerned for his love to be shared

(as Onica has put it in her introduction to the Service) ... to be 'shared through loving, respectful and flourishing relationships' and by 'demonstrating our Christian faith in action'. And the heart of our faith, our starting point for such action, is our firm commitment to say 'Yes, I am the servant of the Lord.'

Not as in the apartheid South Africa, where serving was corrupted. Some were called 'boys' and 'girls' or domestics in a derogatory manner, and their dignity, respect and well-being demeaned.

We have choice. And we willingly say 'I am a servant of the Lord.' For we know that God is the God of love, of care, of compassion – who seeks only our best. He does not exploit. He does not oppress. To be his servant is to find, not servitude, but freedom. To serve him is to walk in the ways he sets before us – and to know that these are better ways than we could ever discover by ourselves. To be a servant of the Lord is to put our hand in the hand of the living God, our Saviour Jesus Christ – and to let him lead and direct us to a life that brings human flourishing for ourselves and for others around us: including both our families and our societies. This is true liberty, this is true freedom.

The Christian journey has sometimes been likened to that of a train. Does a train lack freedom when it is confined to the tracks? Well, one might argue that it is freer if it goes anywhere and everywhere. But in practice, we know that a train in the open veldt will not go fast and will not go far. Indeed, it is more likely to get bogged down and completely stuck. However, on the tracks it can go anywhere – anywhere that it is designed to go, and fulfil the potential with which it was made, to deliver people, goods and services where they need to be, and hopefully on time, too!

It is the same with us. To be a servant of the Lord is not to constrain ourselves, but to find ourselves where we, like the trains, run freely in the ways that God sets before us – fuelled by his Holy Spirit: so we too can fulfil the potential with which we were made, to bring God's redemptive compassion, and his abundant life, to all.

By abundant life I mean that God's desire for all of us is that human beings should not be in want. No one should go hungry, or be without clothing and shelter when it is cold and wet. God's desire is that children should be cared for – by their biological parents, or in another form of loving, caring, compassionate family life.

He expects us to use the hearts that he gives us, and our brains, and our will-power, to do what is right, to care for one another so that none are wanting.

In a society such as ours, God's desire is that no one should have too little – and this also means that no one should have too much. And it especially means that none of us should profit at the expense or the wellbeing of another. No one should have four toilets and others none; no one with too much income and others

sentenced to basic income grants. God calls us to take the yoke of servitude off others.

In Hogsback last Saturday I said, referring to the departments of Education and Health, “the Eastern Cape is a failed state, a dysfunctional state. And there is corruption which is pervasive, and it is stealing from tax payers and creating poverty. This is not service as servanthood.”

The paradox of the gospel is that if we choose servant-hood, we choose freedom and we choose life – we choose the gift and grace and righteousness of which our second reading spoke. But if we choose servitude, we choose to diminish others and all of society and ourselves; and scripture warns that this is the path to condemnation and destruction.

I am speaking here about people’s lives, here in South Africa in 2011; and I am speaking about the choices that we will make in the forthcoming elections. Will we choose life for all, or opulence for some at the expense of others? We are not a rich country – but what we have should be enough to go round. We should have enough for everyone to have the food they need, the shelter they need, fresh drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities. Every child should have access to a decent education and health facilities. There should be an adequate level of health care that is available, and affordable, to everyone.

I offer these questions, mindful of all our other achievements as a country. But I still ask - Where is the urgency amongst our politicians to achieve these basic standards of living for everyone? Have those who seek elected office not understood that to lead is also to serve?

They should remember that Jesus said ‘The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life’ – to give his life so that those in need might also know life (Matthew 20:28). Is this the model that our politicians follow? Or are they just willing to pay lip service when they promise to help the poor and the needy?

I say this to you here today, and I say this to the country at large: in a democracy, God is not for or against any particular political party. God is the servant of no party and its manifesto. Rather, God calls on all the parties and all the politicians to serve him, and to serve the people of this nation – to put the needs of the needy before their own ambitions, before their own interests, before their own desires for power and status.

God is judge, judge of us all – and he will judge the promises and the actions of us all. Are we prepared to say with Mary, I am the servant of the Lord? Are we prepared to be on God’s side – to live according to God’s manifesto?

God is the one who says 'I came to bring good news to the poor.' He is the one who says 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' He is the one who says 'Treat others as you would like to be treated yourself.' He is the one who had time for the outcasts, the excluded, the unimportant people of his day – his actions remind us that every human being is made in the image of God, and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, dear members of the Mothers' Union – these are the standards we expect of our politicians as the elections draw near. I am proud to be involved with the Eminent Persons Group of the Election Monitoring Network and the Chair of the Electoral Code of Conduct Observer Commission that holds political parties to a Code of good behaviour, that all are asked to sign. It is a commitment to the right to free speech; to tolerance; to promoting open and fair debate between parties, and among candidates and those who support them. It is about behaving with decency and good manners in the little things – not defacing or destroying the posters of others; not shouting people down; not making threats; not spreading false rumours or telling half truths.

Yet it is not only for a few members of the Observer Commission or EMN to ensure that good behaviour is upheld and that we create free and fair conditions for elections. Of course, we cannot be everywhere at once. But actually, the issue is far more fundamental. All the Code of Conduct does is to require people to behave as people ought to behave in any decent democratic society. Therefore it is for all of us to say that this is the sort of society we want – this is the sort of community in which we want to live, to have our families, to raise our children.

So finally, dear members of the Mothers' Union, this returns me to you! For you are everywhere in society – and everywhere you can call on others to be the people we ought to be. And where people fail, you can stand up and say 'Enough is enough! We will not accept intolerance. We will not accept the demonising of others. We will not accept the abuse of the name of God in support of narrow party or sectarian interests.' Instead, in our lives, our words, our actions, we will show others what it means truly to live as servants of the living God – to say Yes, as Mary did, so that God's good purposes for humanity might find expression and fulfilment through us. And we invite others to join us, and do the same – so that the redemption that Jesus won for us on the cross may be known through abundant lives of human flourishing.

Mary said 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

May God give us grace to do the same. Amen