

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Women's Day Service – St George's Cathedral**  
**“Embracing our Human Dignity”**  
**9 August 2011**

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1 Corinthians 12: 12-27; John 20: 11-18

May I speak in the name of God, who is more than a Father and Mother to every human child. Dear Sisters in Christ – dear Sisters and Brothers also – it is a great joy to be with you today as we mark Women's Day; and a particular joy to be at this Tri-Diocesan Event and to feel myself part of the wider historic family of the Anglican Church across the Western Cape. On behalf of us all, may I express heartfelt thanks to the Revd Cheryl Bird, and all of those who have worked with her – across the Dioceses and at the Cathedral – in preparing for today's service. Thanks also to all who are participating in this service, and to those who have prepared the refreshments for us afterwards!

The Gospel reading we have just heard is one to which we often turn when we consider the ministry of women in the Church. Here Mary Magdalene is commissioned by the risen Christ to be, as we often put it, 'the apostle to the apostles'. She underlines for us God's insistence on using all of his children without distinction. Women as witnesses didn't count for much in those days. But Jesus called on Mary to be an apostle: a channel of the good news of his resurrection; of his defeat of sin and death; and of his promise of forgiveness and cleansing, healing and wholeness, justice and peace, and new life to all who trust in him. It was her task to spread the news that he who had come as friend and brother, was also the embodiment of the living God who reaches out in redemptive love to every single human being.

He makes the same call to each one of us today. The fact that we need a 'Women's Day' on our calendar indicates how much we yearn for such forgiveness and cleansing, healing and wholeness, justice and peace, new beginnings, and most of all, the supremacy of redemptive love, in the gender-related aspects of our lives. It indicates how much we recognise that we fall way, way, short of these ideals, often getting it hopelessly, hopelessly wrong.

And yet, it is a good start that we can make such an admission of our failings and shortcomings. Acknowledging what is wrong is the necessary first step for making changes. And acknowledging what is wrong before God is the necessary first step for receiving his strengthening

of our wills, and his empowering of our lives, to help us make those changes.

So today, we come before God acknowledging our need, our desire, to make a difference; and opening ourselves to receive his directing and equipping for this task. For we know that we are part of a society – and sometimes even a church – that, far too often, does not treat its women well: whether in actions, in words, or attitudes. And too often, children also are caught up in these harmful situations – the little ones for whom Jesus cared so much.

Yet as we look to Jesus, and the way he cherished children, and the way he dignified women and their roles in his church, we can sometimes be daunted by his example. We know he was fully human and fully divine – yet we are ‘only human’. Though he identifies completely with all it is to be human, even suffering death, we can also feel at times that his example of sinless living is so far beyond us, we do not know where to begin in answering his call ‘follow me’. Mary Magdalene’s example can give us courage.

She had dared to be near the cross on Good Friday – not doing anything, not saying anything, but being present, watching; and later she had taken note of where Jesus’ body had been laid. Sometimes that is all we have to do as a first step. We have to be present to what is happening, to watch, to see, to take note. What we have to look at may disturb and shake us – but, for a first step, it is not too hard to do.

And then, on the Sunday morning, Mary goes early to the tomb. The other gospels speak of the women taking spices that they had prepared. As is so often the case, it is left to the women to do the necessary ‘clearing up afterwards’ – to be those who follow on behind events and deal with the mess, or whatever needs to be done.

For Mary and the others, it was dealing with the aftermath of death. So often in our society, women bear the burden, and deal with the hardest consequences, of poverty, of violence, of abuse, of discrimination. Even in our church, so often men take on the leadership roles – while it is women behind the scenes who do so much of the work! As you may know, at Provincial Synod last year, one of my dreams is to consecrate a woman bishop for our Province, during my time as Metropolitan!

Mary arrives at the tomb and finds it empty. So now she has to do something with what she has seen and noted – she has to tell others this information. This too can be our next step – to pass on what we have seen and noted to those around us, perhaps to those with some sort of leadership in our own situations. Mary runs to Simon Peter; and he, and ‘the other disciple’ – whom we always assume to be John – race to the tomb ahead of her. They see, they may or may not understand, and they leave, ‘returning to their homes’ says the gospel. Whether or not they

bothered to say anything to Mary, as they left together, is not recorded!! Men, eh?!

As we just heard read, Mary stood outside the tomb crying. She was not afraid to engage with the situation with her heart and soul – she was not merely looking at the facts of what she saw. She was part of this situation. It is in the honesty of this experience – being vulnerable, unafraid to show her love, her care and her pain for the one she had seen suffer and die – that she encounters the risen Christ. And, as we know so well, she receives from Jesus the commission to report not just what she has seen, but to declare his own message of resurrection good news to those who need to hear it. She receives the joy and the boldness of those who know that, in the midst of death and apparent defeat, life and love triumph. She knows that she has been caught up into the new world in which we can know the reality of that forgiveness and cleansing, healing and wholeness, justice and peace, new beginnings, and most of all, the supremacy of redemptive love, which, as I said before, we need so very, very, much.

The Risen Christ who meets her in her weakness, in her need, in the pain of what she sees and experiences, is the Risen Christ who meets us too. We must follow Mary Magdalene's example, taking that first step of being present to what is happening, watching, really seeing, and taking note. And we must be ready to speak about what we see.

This is at the heart of the White Ribbon Campaign, to which I am so glad to be giving my pledge today, on behalf of this Diocese – while Bishops Merwyn and Raphael do the same for their Dioceses. For it is not enough for us merely to be those who neither commit nor condone gender-based violence. We must also speak out. We cannot remain silent – for to do so is all too often to be complicit in allowing such abuse to continue.

Like Mary Magdalene, we must tell of what we see. We must name what is before us, if we are to go on and find solutions. Then, we too must be unafraid to engage with the situations we encounter, with heart and soul, as well as merely our heads; and be prepared to step in and be part of these circumstances. We too must be honest before God about what we experience – allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, and to feel love and care and pain for those who suffer. Then we too will encounter the risen Christ, as Mary Magdalene did. We too will receive his commission to declare Christ's message of resurrection good news to those who need to hear it. And like Mary, we will also receive the joy and the boldness of those who know that, in the midst of death and apparent defeat, life and love triumph.

Dear Sisters in Christ, dear people of God, sharing together as the body of Christ is a source of tremendous gladness. And yet we also know the truth of St Paul's words that if one part of the body suffers, the whole

body suffers. And as we look at the communities from which we come, we know that where there is pain and brokenness, the whole community is affected. This comes in everything from petty crime that escalates, through to abuse and violence within families and within neighbourhoods, to lax morality not only in relationships but in relation to honesty, truth-telling, and upholding high and holy standards in every aspect of life. Where society is sick, the whole body is brought low. We also see this in the injustices within our economy, in the way public debate is too often about mud-slinging and personal attacks rather than informed discussion, in the dubious ethical values of too many of our country's leaders.

All this can seem overwhelming. But when we look with honest, open eyes, as Mary looked; when we step into these situations with vulnerable hearts; when we bring them before the Lord – then we will encounter the Risen Christ, and know what Mary knew. With her, we will find ourselves caught up into the new world, where Jesus has overcome sin and death, and all that diminishes humanity, and harms God's children. And like her, we will be able to proclaim the reality of that forgiveness and cleansing, healing and wholeness, justice and peace, new beginnings, and most of all, the supremacy of redemptive love, into every situation which we encounter.

I must admit that there are times when I find myself outside my comfort zone, and have to remember Mary's example. You probably know that I am getting a reputation as 'the toilet bishop' because of the visits I have made to Khayelitsha with other faith community leaders, especially to look at questions of sanitation. The conditions in which I grew up in Alexandra township were pretty grim, but nothing I saw there prepared me for conditions in Khayelitsha where some people are practically living on top of open sewers. And who can forget the heartbreaking case of the little boy who was dragged from his home and killed by dogs, while his mother left him in order to go to the toilet. We can only come before God aware of our human weaknesses before such tragedies, and ask for him to empower us to bring his hope, his redemptive change, to such situations.

The God who met Mary Magdalene in her weakness, in her need, in the pain of what she sees and experiences, is the God who will indeed meet us too. Dear Sisters in Christ – we know that the deepest yearning in the heart of God is to bring healing and wholeness to his children. For God did indeed love the world so much that he sent his Son, not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved, redeemed, rescued through him. And Jesus his Son, willingly laid down his life for those he loves – for every single human being who has ever existed, and for the sake of this world which we inhabit.

There is nothing that God wants more, than for us to accept and receive this good news for all people. And there is no-one that he cannot,

and will not, use as a channel of his good purposes, just as he use Mary Magdalene. So today, once more, we come as Mary did – out of love for Jesus, weeping at the pain and sufferings we experience. Let us be open to be surprised by the Risen Christ – encountering him in places, in situations, in ways, we did not expect – and ready to be the channels of his good news of healing and wholeness to a broken world. Amen