

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Sermon for All Anglican Schools Day
10 September 2011

1 Tim 1:15-17,

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Luke 6:43-49

‘No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

‘Why do you call me “Lord, Lord”, and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.’

May I speak in the name of the One God, who is our solid rock and our firm foundation.

Let me say again what a joy it is to be with you this morning. Thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts with you as you begin your meeting. Thank you to ... and everyone else involved in the organisation of this service, and the day ahead.

Our lectionary has provided two wonderful readings to focus our reflections.

What could be more apt, when we consider the education of young people, than training them to build their lives on firm foundations, on the true rock?

What could be better, than preparing them for lives that bear good fruit?

This is surely the heart of this special calling, which God has entrusted to you.

This is what parents are yearning for, for their precious sons and daughters.

It is also what our God yearns for, for all of his children.

This means all of us who are gathered here today – it is for us also to ensure that this is how we shape our own lives.

And therefore I am glad that we have the twin parables of our gospel reading.

It is not just a question of foundations – the legacy of the past, whether the past of the institutions which we serve (and I am speaking as much about the Church as about historic Schools); or even past decisions of our own lives.

We also have the picture of fruitfulness.

I used to think I knew at least something about gardens.

But moving to Bishopscourt has opened my eyes to the continual attention and hard work that is needed to ensure that you grow what you ought to be growing – that you keep the weeds under control, and that you tend and nurture what really matters.

This is a lesson for all of us.

We cannot hope to train others not only to have an academic understanding of what Christianity is all about; but instead truly to have a firmly grounded, fruit-bearing, life – one rooted in an ever maturing and deepening relationship with Jesus as Lord and Saviour – if we do not have this ourselves.

We need to be the constant and attentive gardeners of our own lives, first of all, if we are to bring about fruitfulness in the lives of others.

St Paul's words to Timothy are a comfort and encouragement to us.

Sometimes it can feel that the weeds of our own lives are getting out of control, despite our best efforts.

Sometimes – as I find myself, if I am not careful – the soil of our lives seems exhausted by all that has been demanded by us, and looks almost barren.

Or perhaps we planted a fine garden years ago, but have expected it to look after itself, while we turned our energies to the next project.

A former Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, very wisely warned of the dangers of getting so caught up in the work of the Lord, that we take our eyes off the Lord of the work.

But, says St Paul, our Lord, like the best of all gardeners, has the utmost patience with us.

Whatever our need:

- whether we are floundering because of external pressures;
- whether we are culpable to a lesser or greater degree in our struggles, perhaps through neglecting to live as God calls;
- or even whether, like St Paul himself on the road to Damascus, we suddenly discover we have been focussing our energies in the wrong direction altogether, even if we thought we were acting out of the best possible motives –

whatever our need, the mercy of God is for us.

And so is his redeeming power – his redemptive capacity to take whatever is awry, and straighten it out; to bring a healing and wholeness that not only overcome what has gone wrong, but take us forward into a new and potentially more fruitful place.

So, this morning, the first, and most important thing I want to say, is this: let God take care of you, so that you can take care of others.

In contemporary life, it is counter-cultural for those in authority to admit to any sort of vulnerability or dependence.

But in fact, if we are to teach those entrusted to our care to rely on the living God, then we must ourselves model that same sort of trusting reliance, grounded in an acknowledgement of our own neediness, and fallibility.

The next generation need to know how to deal with the ups and downs of life, and with the mistakes they will inevitably make, the problems they will

inevitably face, the failures that will inevitably come their way alongside their successes – and it is only if we also build on rock, tend the fruit, abide in God, that we can show them how to do it well.

Let me now move from this first point to the second.

We tend the garden to bear fruit, ‘fruit that will last’, as Jesus describes it at the last supper.

It is fruit for others to eat – so God’s kingdom may grow and thrive.

It is especially fruit for the hungry and the undernourished.

You represent a very privileged group within the education sector.

And within the Independent Schools’ Association, I believe that Anglican Schools – through your networking on days like today, and deliberate commitment together to follow where God calls – have the potential to make a significant difference.

The problems of education in South Africa are well known.

Trevor Manuel talked about them earlier this week, in a powerful presentation he made to National and Provincial Parliamentarians on the UN Millennium Development Goals.

He said that the real issue in this country is not money – the fiscus has more than enough to fund development way beyond the MDGs.

Rather, the problem is in spending it wisely and well.

This is particularly acute in education.

Statistically speaking, South Africa does well in ‘ticking the boxes’, as he put it – 99.7% of children have access to primary education, which is well above the MDG target.

But this figure says nothing about the quality of teaching, and in fact, he said, ‘outcomes in education are abysmal.’

I'm sure you know the facts. For example, of the 1.4 million pupils that started school in 1999, 600,000 sat for matric last year, of which 67.8% passed, yet only 15% of those that passed obtained matric marks higher than 40%. 'But', said Trevor Manuel, 'if you pass like that, there is very little you can do in society.'

He also claimed the education system was to blame for most ills in South Africa -from unemployment, to crime, corruption and the state of the health care system.

He said, 'The reason so few South Africans work is because people leave school without elementary skills. The reasons we have such problems with healthcare is that the education system appears not to equip people to deal with choices about their conduct, whether this be their alcohol consumption or their sexual conduct.'

And he went on to add 'The reason people are so tolerant of corruption in this country is that the education system does not empower people to rise up and say "What is happening is wrong." So if we want transformation then, education is going to have to be fundamental. Perhaps the most abused word in South Africa is empowerment, but education is the genesis of empowerment. Unless you deal with this issue, the other issues are not going to fall into place.'

Well, I have quoted from Trevor Manuel at length, because of the importance of his analysis

The question is, what do we do with it? How do we help make a difference where education is dysfunctional. The situation is so bad in the Eastern Cape that the national ministry has taken control from the Province. But elsewhere, there are major problems also.

What is the solution?

Well, today, I want to propose a 'big ask' to you.

I believe that the churches must step back into education, and become far more widely involved.

The Bantu Education Act of 1954 took over more than 5,000 'aided schools' the majority with some degree of church control.

But we cannot just wade back in, armed with nothing more than good intentions.

We generally no longer have significant educational expertise within our central structures.

So my 'big ask' of you is this. Can you help us? Can you provide us with advice, proposals, blue-prints, to resource us so we can engage constructively with education departments, Provincially and nationally?

How can we best 'get involved'? What can churches reasonably, realistically, expect to be able to offer?

And tell us too, what is unrealistic, where we need to be modest, or hold back, or otherwise not let our enthusiasms run away with us!

How can we plan sensibly, sustainably, to help our whole nation build its future upon solid rock?

How can I, as Archbishop, make the most of the doors that open up to me; how can I best respond to broad invitations to the churches to help make a difference in education?

You, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, are the ones to whom I turn for help. There is great need, there are considerable opportunities.

As members of the body of Christ, sharing our different gifts, skills, experiences, perhaps we can together make a significant difference – perhaps we can together work to produce genuine fruit, fruit that will last.

Please consider my proposal, and let me know what advice you can offer.

So, finally, may God guide you as you take counsel together today.

May he bless you richly, and may he make you a blessing to others – whether those directly entrusted to your care; within the broader Independent School sector, and even in the wider education system of our nation.

And, as St Paul wrote to Timothy, To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen