

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
‘Righteousness Like an Ever-Lasting Stream’
Sermon at Morning Prayer, St George’s Cathedral
with Their Royal Highnesses,
The Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall
6 November 2011

Amos 5:18-24

Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus said, ‘Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” But the wise replied, “No! There will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.”

And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.” But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.’

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of Life.

The lessons set for this morning have given us Jesus’ parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, awaiting the arrival of the groom.

I suspect that in this year of royal weddings, you, Your Royal Highnesses, know rather more than most of us, about quite how much preparation such occasions require!

[Possible pause for laughter]

It even crossed my mind, Sir, that I should perhaps cede the pulpit to you!

[Possible pause for laughter]

But let me instead add my welcome to that of the Dean – greeting you on behalf of not only my wife Lungi and myself, but the whole Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

May your time with us, this morning and throughout your visit, be richly blessed.

Jesus' call to 'stay awake' and 'be prepared' is of course not merely for wedding guests.

This is one of his parables of the end of time, when the Son of Man comes in glory but also with judgement.

In using such stories to convey eternal mysteries beyond the grasp of secular language, Jesus' message is nonetheless clear.

For everyone, there will be a final reckoning. All of us must give account of ourselves, and of the lives we have lived.

Therefore the daily choices we make – the paths we follow, our actions, our words, our attitudes – should be shaped by the knowledge that one day the Son of Man, the bridegroom, Jesus Christ himself, will come, and we must be ready.

Yet Jesus not only speaks of coming at the end of the age. He also promises to be with us always, from now until that time (Mt 28:20).

Therefore we must remain awake, like the wise bridesmaids: supplied with oil, and alert to recognise the groom whenever, wherever, he appears – ready to shine their lamps so all may see him.

We are to draw attention to the active presence of Christ in our world, so that others may also recognise him, and find his infinite love, and with it, his compassion, his redemption, his forgiveness, his healing, his strength, his courage, his peace.

For God longs to meet humanity's deepest needs, whatever they may be, far more than we can imagine.

What then is this oil, and how do we keep our supplies replenished, ready to shine?

The answer lies in prayer; in reading and reflecting on God's Holy Word; and in resting in meditation, in God's presence – in the sunshine of God's love – whether in the daily rhythms of private prayer or in the formal worship of Sunday services.

Here we must take guidance from our first reading.

Amos, the shepherd of Tekoa, was a prophet from way outside Jerusalem's politico-religious elite.

After pronouncing judgement on the surrounding nations, Amos shockingly uttered similar condemnation against Jerusalem's leaders too.

In the words the High Commissioner read for us, Amos denounced their grand religious observances as hypocrisy. They will find, he says, that on the Day of the Lord, God will not – as they expect – bring great joy, and triumph over their adversaries.

Instead, like the foolish bridesmaids, they will be judged, found wanting, and rejected.

For – as Amos' says elsewhere – the powerful oppress the poor, pursuing corruption and perverting justice for their own gain.

Their religion is empty – whereas it should overflow with the things of God: justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an everlasting stream.

However impressive this building, however glorious our music, or splendid our liturgy – it too is meaningless, unless our hearts, our lives, overflow with the justice and righteousness that come from God's immeasurable love for all his people, all his creatures, all his creation.

This is the oil that should burn in our lives – illuminating the truth of who God is, and what he desires for us.

As individuals, and together; on a grand scale or in life's smallest details – we are to reflect Christ's redemptive presence in all our circumstances and opportunities.

This may mean speaking and working for social justice, and for just and equitable global economic systems based in the reality of a finite planet and its need for conservation. [You, Sir, stressed these, particularly the latter, yesterday at the University of Cape Town – while the Archbishop of Canterbury has this week repeated his calls for fair financial systems.]

It may challenge how we interact with colleagues – especially junior staff and employees; or speak to neighbours; or order family life.

It may prompt joining a civil society group, or holding local councillors to account, or volunteering for a Cathedral-based project.

Anglicans have particular opportunities to pursue justice and righteousness, as salt and light in the world.

Last month, I accompanied the Archbishop of Canterbury to Zimbabwe, where – praise God – we seem to have made a constructive difference.

Last weekend I was with the Church in Canada, discussing options for co-operation.

Later this month COP-17 opens in Durban – and we will stand alongside other faith communities, lobbying governments to make binding environmental commitments.

Together, we can achieve far more than the sum of what we do apart.

Jesus speaks of Christians as the body of Christ for a reason. Athletes training for next year's London Olympics know how hard it is to have each part fit, working in harmony. Anglican differences strain our relationships, we know – but holding together in Christ we can achieve far more together than divided.

Finally, let me end with the best news.

We do not shoulder this responsibility for justice and righteousness unaided.

Unlike the resources of this planet, God's oil is limitless. All we need do is open ourselves to him, so he may fill us to overflowing.

Jesus promises each of us: 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened ... for how much more does our Father in heaven give good things to those who ask.'

So, Your Royal Highnesses, dear people of God, dear brothers and sisters in Christ – may God bless us, and bless others through us. Through us may his justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everlasting stream.

Amen