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St Paul's, Durban
Theme: Anglicans in Mission – Here am I, Send me!
13 November 2011

May I speak in the name of God, the Father who sends his Son, to lead us in God's mission to God's world, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Dear people of God of St Paul's, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear Fellow Bishops – and most especially, our brand new Bishop Tsietsi! – let me say again what a great joy it is to share this morning's celebration with you all.

Archdeacon May, I am particularly grateful to you, and to all those who have worked with you on today's service – everyone involved in preparation, and everyone participating, and all those who work so very hard behind the scenes.

Thank you again.

My theme is 'Anglicans in Mission: Here am I, send me!'

How often have we heard that rousing passage as Isaiah tells us of how God called him to the life of a prophet.

How often do we feel our own hearts and souls rise within us, yearning to echo Isaiah's words, 'Here am I, send me!'

What we so often fail to do, however, is to read the verses that follow immediately.

The Lord answer's Isaiah's cry saying 'Go, and say to the people, "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand".'

From the word go, Isaiah discovers that his calling is not going to be an easy one.

Neither rulers nor people will listen to his warnings of judgement – and so that judgement will come, as he warns, through exile. Only beyond exile lies the promise of the fuller and greater redemption, which our Isaiah will not have lived to see.

And yet his words have lived on – the living word of God, spoken through him, has not returned empty, but instead (as it says in chapter 55 – whether written by the same Isaiah, or a successor in his tradition) it ‘accomplishes that which God purposes, and succeeds in the things for which God sent it’.

The words of Isaiah continue to bear fruit among us today, as so many of can attest to, in terms of the impact that this, and other passages, have on our lives.

And yet, Isaiah was not to know this.

Last night, the lesson at Evening Prayer contained the verses where Jesus tells his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it’ (Mt 16:24-5).

And of course, Jesus himself, sent by the Father, was, as St Paul writes to the Philippians, ‘obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross’ (Phil 2:8). Responding to God’s call is not to be taken lightly.

God rarely takes us where we expect him to lead us. Often our calling comes at personal cost.

And God’s idea of what constitutes success and its rewards is, as we see from the life of Isaiah, from the life of Jesus, from the life of St Paul, a very long way from, say Kenny Kunene’s birthday party!

Smuts Ngonyama famously said ‘I didn’t join the struggle, to stay poor.’

Well, we don’t say ‘Here I am, send me!’ to God, if our ambition is to get rich!

What then, does it mean, to say Yes to God’s call – to respond to Jesus who says ‘follow me’, and then, all too often, leads us to places that are far outside our comfort zone?

We do so, because, in a way probably far less spectacular than Isaiah, we have somehow encountered something of the living God.

We have felt our lives touched by Jesus Christ

– King of kings and Lord of lords;

– the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world;

– the eternal second person of the Trinity who was content to empty himself of

the glories of heaven, be born in a stable, and to die upon the cross.

We have met God; and recognised our need of him, of his salvation and redemption, in all our failings and fallibilities.

We have recognised that we cannot live without him.

When many of Jesus' followers turned away once he began to teach that discipleship is costly, he asked the twelve 'Do you also wish to go away?'

We are those whose hearts echo the words of St Peter, 'Lord, to whom else could we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God' (Jn 6:66-9).

And we have grasped the fact that, as it says in today's Gospel, that, just as the Father sent Jesus, so he sends us.

The mind-blowing truth is that the all-powerful God shares his mission of love and forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption, to his world, through the agency of human beings, warts and all.

God chooses to work through people just like you and me.

No, that's not quite right. He chooses to work not through people *like* you and me. He chooses to work through you and me!

This is the wonder of it all – that we can make a difference; we can make God's difference; in responding to his call with faithful obedience we will find that the things we say and do make a difference to the world – a difference that might last centuries, a difference with eternal significance.

And if we think of it this way, what better calling could there be?
What could be more successful, than changing the course of history, and leaving a mark that matters even in the heavenly realm!

This is the basis for all ministry, for all mission.

And I rather suspect that I am today in many ways 'preaching to the converted'.

For I know that over the decades, St Paul's, through individuals, as a congregation, and in its leaders, has not been afraid to answer the costly call of God's sending.

You have followed Christ in ways that have sometimes taken you outside the comfort zones of our churches – but you have been a beacon to many.

And in giving yourselves to the ministry of the Lord, you have put your hands deep into your pockets and given with great generosity to the work of the Diocese and to the Province.

You have been a great encouragement to many – let me today offer my thanks on behalf of the Province to you, and to the rest of this Diocese.

Natal remains the highest giver of any Diocese within the Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

Your support to the Diocese of Niassa, to the College of the Transfiguration, and to the Anglican House of Studies – to name but three of the projects you assist – has made, I am sure, a godly difference.

You have lent your resources in other ways too – in people.

St Pauls has nurtured many – laity and clergy who have served here, of which there are a number present today! – who have then gone on to serve the church in more demanding positions.

Thank you, for building up such treasures, and thank you then for being able to let them go.

And human resources have been shared in other ways.

This Diocese has been ahead of the curve in many areas of management and good governance, and has brought these skills to play within our Province.

For example, though Bishop Rubin and Robin Green often ask the most difficult of questions at Provincial Finance Committee, and criticise poor practice without holding back; their contribution has made a significant and vital difference, which both Archbishop Njongo and I have come to value highly, even as it has stretched us to do better!

And this Diocese – and Bishop Rubin in particular – have not only helped in the formal life of the Province; but also often behind the scenes and outside legal

structures, for example, walking with Dioceses going through troubled times.

Thank – thank you, particularly to Bishop Rubin (and here, let me pay tribute also to Rose) – thank you for all you have done, and for all you continue to do, offering yourselves unreservedly in the service of the Church, despite the personal cost and pains you have suffered.

We thank you both, from the bottom of our hearts.

Gratitude is at the heart of mission.

Today it is my great privilege to express gratitude to you at St Paul's, and to so many associated with you, and to the wider Diocese, and your Bishops, for all you do.

Yet gratitude is at the heart of mission in a more profound way.

For God in Christ by the Spirit has done 'everything' for us.

Created, redeemed, and sustained, in every moment of our very being – how could we not be grateful to God in response?

And how could we do otherwise, than share with others the overflowing love which we have received?

The name of this is 'mission'.

People of God are inevitably people of mission – it is a state of being, a state of living responsively to all that we receive from God; of allowing his love to pour through us; of letting ourselves become the people he calls us to be – called and sent in whatever way he chooses.

And I think it is fair to say that the being of mission comes before the doing.

We do mission because it flows from our being. For, if, as we heard in our second lesson, we 'have received Christ Jesus the Lord, and continue to live our lives in him', how could it be anything else?

Jesus' whole life was lived in mission. He said 'I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but to do the will of him who sent me' (Jn 6:38).

We too, must be God's sent people.

God sends us in many ways – for God is the God of mission.

Indeed, Mission has been described – drawing on words from the National Council of Churches in Australia, as:

‘the creating, reconciling and transforming action of God, flowing from the community of love found in the Trinity, made known to all humanity in the person of Jesus, and entrusted to the faithful action and witness of the people of God, who, in the power of the Spirit, are a sign, foretaste, and instrument, of the reign of God.’

That’s quite a mouthful!

But all we need to know about mission is signposted there – first the character of God, the God who is Trinity, made known in Jesus Christ.

Second, that it is entrusted to us – and we are empowered by God’s Spirit, so through word and action, we can point the way to, give others a glimpse of, and be a means of bringing about, the reign of God.

What a wonderful vision!

But mission is also intensely practical.

In the conduct of mission, the Anglican Communion has identified what it calls ‘Five Marks’.

Perhaps you know them. They are:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

And now we are considering adding more, to deal specifically with conflict resolution and peace-building.

From growing the church – in quantity, in quality; in numbers and in discipleship and Christian maturity – through to questions of social and environmental justice: mission takes many, and varied, forms.

(And when it comes to the integrity of creation, I hope I will see you all in a fortnight's time at the King's Park Stadium, as faith communities join in calling governments to clear, just but ambitious, binding commitments at COP-17).

From healing souls, to the healing of nations, there is no part of human activity that is outside God's compassionate care and concern.

So any of us may find ourselves called into any of these areas.

What matters, is that we are prepared to be called, to be sent.

And though I began my sermon by warning that we may find that saying yes takes us on hard paths, Jesus' promise is that he will be with us, every step of the way.

Rooted and grounded in him, as St Paul describes the life of faith, we will find that he leads and guides us in what we should say and do.

Dwelling within us through the presence of the Holy Spirit, he will strengthen us when we are weak, encourage us when we are downhearted, and inspire us when we feel we are running on empty.

And when we let him down – as inevitably we will, and not only once but time and again – he will hold out his hand, offering to set us back on our feet, and start again, if we are only willing to acknowledge our weakness and failings, trust in him to take us forward.

He takes our feeble efforts, the actions we perform with mixed motives, our grudging good deeds, and redeems their shortcomings and distortions, in order to bring about his purposes through them.

Sometimes we may not even see the consequences of our words or actions. Sometimes it may seem that we labour for long periods to little effect. Sometimes it may be years later that we learn that something we said or did made a difference to someone else's life.

Yet we do not need to know how, exactly, God uses our words and actions. We just need to trust that he does – and Scripture assures us that he most certainly will ensure they bear fruit.

I suspect it is for our own good that it is often so hard to judge whether we are 'successful' or not as Christians.

For it would not do, if we became hung up on trying to measure the effect of what we say and do.

No, what matters is that we are faithful and obedient. It is faithful and obedient lives that bear the most fruit, from God's perspective.

And though Jesus may take us on costly paths, the rewards are far greater than the riches even of Patrick Motsepe or the Oppenheimers!

For all the joys of heaven will be ours – joys of which we already have a foretaste, when we know the loving and compassionate touch of our Saviour and Lord, who delights also to call us friend; and who gives us his peace, which is far beyond any peace that the world can know.

People of God of St Paul's, Durban; brothers and sisters in Christ; we live in a changing world.

The needs of our times keep on changing. We may find ourselves called and sent in new ways, to new places.

But we can be sure of this – that God's love and compassion for his world, his children, are unchanging.

And so too is his call to us, in Christ.

Jesus still says 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' and to those who respond, he says 'Receive the holy Spirit'.

Therefore, let us be open to God, as once again he says to us 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'

And – confident that he who calls will also equip – let us respond 'Here am I, Lord, send me!'

May it be so. Amen

