

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
The Funeral of Judge Fikele Bam
28 December 2011

Isaiah 6:1-8; Jn 1:6-14

May I speak in the name of God, the Everlasting Father, whose Eternal Son – our Saviour and our Prince of Peace – is born among us by the power of his Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me once again greet you, in the name of the Lord, and acknowledge our distinguished guests today – your Majesties, your Excellencies, chiefs, kings, rulers, political leaders; your Graces, Bishops, and other clergy; dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear friends.

Most of all I greet you, dear Xoliswa, your children, the wider Bam family, and all who loved Fikile and are today here to mourn his death.

It is particularly sad to be dealing with death at a time of year when we especially focus on birth – the birth of Jesus.

Yet the good news that comes to us with the birth of Jesus, is the same good news that we most need to hear today, as we come together to mourn the passing of our dear friend ‘Bro Fiks’, even as we celebrate his life.

‘Do not be afraid’ said the angel of the Lord to the shepherds, in the fields with their sheep, on that dark night long ago.

‘Do not be afraid’ is still God’s message to us, in the darkness of sadness and sorrow.

‘Do not be afraid – because a Saviour is born.’

The child in the manger grew to be the man on the cross, and the man who rose from the grave, breaking for all eternity the power of death.

God gave himself, in Jesus Christ, who truly is our Saviour – so that he might offer us the greatest gifts, of:

- life beyond death,
- redemption beyond failings,
- healing beyond illness,
- wholeness beyond suffering,
- peace beyond pain,
- joy beyond sorrow.

He promises, to all of us who put our hand in his, that he will bring us to a heavenly home, where one day we shall all be together in his loving embrace, and he will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

‘Do not be afraid’ is Christ’s message to us today. ‘Do not be afraid of death, for I have overcome death, and it cannot harm you, it cannot harm Fikile.’

So we meet today, and dare to hope, even as we weep for ourselves, at the loss of this dear man whom we loved so much.

And we *must* weep; and weep whenever the sadness of loss comes to us.

Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus, though he knew he would be returned to life by his Father in heaven.

And Jesus tells us all, ‘blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.’

He says to us all ‘Do not be afraid to grieve’ – for in grieving, we come before God acknowledging the depths of our love, the depths of our loss, and perhaps also other pains of unfinished business, words unsaid, issues not dealt with.

Yet when we open ourselves to God in our grieving, we open ourselves also to receive his comfort, his strength, his encouragement to go forwards.

So do not be afraid of death, and do not be afraid to grieve. These are Jesus' words to you, today, Xoliswa, and to all your six children; and to all who loved Fiks, and whose hearts are sore at his dying.

We also know that Jesus, who lived and died and was raised, stretches out his arms to hold both the living and the dead – and we can say to him what we might still want to say to Fikile, and know our words will not be lost.

So today we are here to mourn, and bring God our sadness, our regrets, our sorrow, our tears.

Yet we are also here today to celebrate the life of a remarkable man, a wonderful man – not without his faults, his quirks, but nonetheless, a very special human being.

I will not say too much about him. So many words were shared last week, and more will be said later today.

But I will say a little!

For he has been a dear friend to me and to my family over many years – including as a parishioner; and an astute critic of the church, which we have also needed.

He has also been a wise advisor to us, the Makgobas, in our own ongoing land claim.

He, with you, Xoliswa, were also overwhelmingly generous to me and my family when my mother died and when my sister died – your support, from the heart, touched us deeply, in our times of need.

Thank you, thank you.

Let me recall that today in the Anglican calendar we remember St John the Evangelist, the writer of the Gospel from which we heard verses read just now.

John and his brother James responded to Jesus' call to them, 'Follow me'.

In very much the same way that the prophet Isaiah answered 'Here am I, send me!' – in the Old Testament reading set for today's celebration of St John.

Dear Fikile was also one who dared to follow Jesus, and to go wherever God would send him – a faithful Anglican, a faithful Christian – whose 74 years took him from Tsolo to Robben Island, and finally on to the Land Claims Court – with impressive detours in business and academia.

Yet, wherever he went, Bro Fiks was not afraid to live like that other John mentioned in the gospel reading – John the Baptist.

He pointed others to Jesus, who 'testified to the light, the true light, which enlightens everyone'.

So much of Bro Fiks' life was spent in promoting this light – the light that heralds the kingdom of God, the kingdom that Jesus came to bring. He laboured and strove for justice, for freedom for the oppressed, for good news for the poor.

That is what took him to the darkness of the Island. That is what, when the new light of democracy dawned, motivated his time as an advocate and as a judge.

I thank God for him, and for Christian lawyers like him – for those who are not there to make money by turning every situation into an opportunity for expensive litigation at the service of the rich; but who really work to ensure justice for all, and especially for the poorest, the neediest, the least educated, the powerless.

Within the New South Africa, the rural poor, most of all, have needed such a champion, and they found it in Judge Bam.

There are many who have enjoyed Christmas in their own home this year, because he took the trouble to ensure that the law was

implemented without fear and favour, to ensure justice was done – that the past exclusions of the homelands, and the marginalisation that has come with today's tendency to focus on urban living, should not stand in the way of ensuring that right was done.

Let me say to you, your Excellency, as Minister of Justice, and to others here who wield power and influence in these areas – let your lights shine as Bro Fiks did! Let his legacy live on, through you, your departments, your professions, your businesses – put them at the service of the poor and weak, the frail and powerless.

Be vigilant, for the sake of our country, of all of us; and do not let all that we have achieved, and for which those like Bra Fiks were imprisoned, and then laboured, be lost or distorted by greed or corruption.

We must not squander God's gift of constitutional democracy. We must use it as he intends, for the good of all.

God in Christ, the second person of the Trinity, was not afraid to leave the power and the glory of heaven, to be born amongst sheep and cattle.

There is no doubt that the King of heaven stands in solidarity with the rural poor – and, as the gospels remind us, our attitude towards what appears to be even the most insignificant individual, is what God records as our attitude towards him.

This is why we must not fail to prioritise rural development.

Let me end by returning to St John's Gospel, in which we find the mysterious figure, called 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'.

Some think that this is a reference to St John himself. Some wonder whether, at the same time, St John is inviting all who hear or read his words to put themselves – to put ourselves – in that position, and so to live, discovering what it means to be Jesus' disciple, and what it means to be loved by Jesus.

For Jesus loves each one of us – with the love of the Christ-child in the manger; and with the love that took him to the cross to save us.

We meet here in sorrow, but also in hope, because we know that Fikile was truly a disciple whom Jesus loved.

And I am sure also that Fikile will hear those words that come to every disciple, as we put our trust in Jesus who helps us through to our journey's end, 'Well done, good and faithful servant – enter now into the joy of your master.'

May it indeed be so.

May he rest in peace – and rise in glory.

Amen