

Wednesday, 15 October 2014

Address to the Annual Prizegiving of Herschel School

Address to the Annual Prizegiving of Herschel Girls School, Cape Town, October 15, 2014:

Good evening, girls! Good evening, parents! And good evening to the whole school community: girls, parents, teachers, headmaster, other members of staff, and members of Council. Thank you Mr West and Council for inviting me to speak tonight, it is an honour indeed.

It's such a joy to be here again for a formal school occasion. Congratulations to you all for your achievements in the past year, individually and collectively: to the prize-winners of course, to the soon-to-be matriculants whose time here is coming to an end, but also to every single one of you. For each one of you is a winner, because each one of you is equally part of this community of achievement, of this body that is Herschel School. And you remember how St. Paul describes a body in his First Letter to the Corinthians? He says "the body does not consist of one member but of many" and that every single member belongs to the body, and that, to quote him again, "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose."

In similar vein, your achievements are not only yours' but they are the achievements of everyone who has supported you over the past year. So, in recognition of that, why don't you the girls, applaud them? First, let's applaud your teachers and the staff and governing body of the school who support them. And now, let's applaud your parents, your grandparents, other members of your family and the cloud of witnesses – your great-grandparents and ancestors – who are looking down on us today!

In the past year, we have seen women and girls in the news in a range of ways that I can't remember seeing before. We have seen stories of pain and despair which are testimony to the ways in which our society continues to disrespect and abuse women, but we have also seen stories of strength and moral courage in which they have demonstrated their resilience and their capacity to triumph over adversity. Let's look at just three examples.

The first is the story of Reeva Steenkamp and our response to her killing. Now I know that Judge Masipa's finding means that we cannot say with a certainty that is beyond reasonable doubt that Reeva's death was a manifestation of how women are abused in South Africa. We need to respect the finding of an experienced judge, who listened to all the evidence, that Oscar Pistorius's explanation of what happened that night might reasonably possibly have been true. But at the very least, we can say that the case, and the arguments around what happened, have put the issue of domestic abuse front and centre on the country's agenda. And that is a good thing, because if you speak to clergy in our communities – who by the nature of our ministry are privileged to hear people's confidences – they will tell you that domestic abuse, and especially the abuse of women and children by men, is one of the greatest of the hidden evils of our society, and that it happens in both poor and wealthy communities.

The second example is the abduction, six months ago last night, of more than 200 girls from the town of Chibok in north-eastern Nigeria by members of the Boko Haram group. That event may seem far removed from South Africa, and in many ways it is, but the growth of movements of extremist thugs – I won't dignify them by calling them religious because the ideas they propagate are a perversion of religion... the phenomenon of extremist thuggery is something that as global citizens we must oppose everywhere. And the phenomenon is not confined to Nigeria or West Africa; it is emerging among disparate, uncoordinated groups in East Africa, North Africa and the Middle East as well, and it poses a challenge which we dare not underestimate.

Those of you who are history students will know that this year marks the centenary of the outbreak of World War One. Margaret MacMillan, a Canadian who is the warden of St Antony's College, Oxford, says that one of the reasons we stumbled into that war, and that so many people died in it,

was that our forebears miscalculated the significance of changes in the nature of warfare. Applying those lessons to our situation today, she gives us this sobering warning:

“A comparable mistake in our own time is the assumption that because of our advanced technology, we can deliver quick, focused and overpowering military actions... drones and cruise missiles... carpet bombing and armoured divisions – resulting in conflicts that will be short and limited in their impact, and victories that will be decisive.”

But she notes that far from seeing easy victories, we are seeing wars with no clear outcomes involving what she calls “a shifting coalition of local warlords, religious warriors and other interested parties” across countries and continents.

The third example to which I want to refer tonight is – you will be thankful to hear – an inspiring one and that is the story of Thuli Madonsela. Isn't it wonderful to listen to her on television laying down the law, not loudly and bombastically as men often do, but in soft, gentle tones? They say that President Theodore Roosevelt of America, a man's man if ever there was one, used to say that a leader should “speak softly and carry a big stick,” and even our beloved Madiba was won't to instinctively respond to certain situations by reaching for his big stick. But I think we can coin a new phrase about Thuli and say: “She speaks softly and carries the Constitution.”

It has struck me recently that one of the major obstacles to solving our problems in South Africa is that we have become a “me” society instead of a “we” society. We ask too often, what are “my” needs and aspirations, not what are “our” needs and aspirations. For South Africa to flourish, we need to move from “me” to “we”, asking not what I can do, but what we can do, together, to meet not my needs, but our needs, and to work for the common good.

How do we, then, as the body of Herschel, demonstrate our refusal to succumb to fear or to become inured to suffering? How do we use our collective capacity for good, our privileges, our inherent love and goodness, to challenge violence, whether domestic, individualised or collective, and corruption? How do we use our innovation, creativity, and even our essay-writing skills, to highlight the problems of our day? How do we demonstrate the values of Herschel? Let me briefly suggest a few places we might start.

Let us commit to addressing the cancer of domestic abuse within our society, helping those who suffer to overcome the paralysis induced by shame and often by their continued love for the perpetrator, and to act to protect themselves.

Let us continue to express our outrage at the holding hostage of the Chibok girls, and let's commit to remove the conditions in our country and beyond which are conducive to the growth of extremism. If we do business with Nigeria or other countries in Africa, let us not collude with the misallocation of resources in those countries.

In South Africa, let us acknowledge that our failure to end the desperate conditions in which many of our people live can create the conditions for an explosion, and let us join efforts started by those including Prof George Ellis and former mayor Gordon Oliver to face up to the crisis. The Department of Human Settlements reported last year that we still have a backlog of about 2.1-million houses. Even if people have houses, about 2.5 million of them don't have proper toilets. My daughter gets embarrassed when I call myself the “toilet archbishop”, but I am compelled to campaign on this issue: a report from the Water Research Commission says only one in three households in Khayelitsha have yard and in-house water and sanitation facilities. About seven in 10 depend largely on communal taps or “stand pipes” for water and have inadequate or no access to sanitation. In parts of the Free State, the Northern Cape and even here in the Western Cape, many people still have to use buckets to remove human waste from their homes.

Let us also join Thuli Madonsela in fighting corruption, rigorously evaluating the energy deal with Russia lest we slap our children and grandchildren with huge bills to pay in their adulthood.

Let us also work for ecological justice, starting with recycling our domestic waste at home.

Let me end on a note of celebration of you and your achievements, and on a note of challenge very specific to Herschel. We have a wonderful school. The quality of your education is attested to by tonight's prizes and your impressive history of outstanding matric results. On behalf of the Diocese and my own behalf, congratulations!

But, as Jesus says in St. Luke's Gospel: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required." At the Western Province Prep School's Centenary Celebration earlier this year, I challenged them to adopt an equity policy and to establish bursaries to attract more black students and more black teachers. Tonight I want to take this opportunity to make the same call on you.

You are a first-class, Christian, value-based school of excellence. I appeal to you to extend the fine work you already do so that it reaches even further into our communities, giving the opportunities we enjoy to even more students, whether from privileged backgrounds or not. Join our church and our Anglican Board of Education in addressing South Africa's educational challenges. Join us in repudiating cynicism, fear and the feeling of being overwhelmed by our country's problems, and help us in our determination to bring about change.

I ask of you, to go into your resources, dig deep into these, and establish an endowment for recruiting more black teachers and bursaries for more black learners. Mr West and Council, that is my plea and more specific a challenge to the school community

Thank you, congratulations again, and God bless you!

+Thabo

Makgoba

Posted by [Anglican Media Office, Bishops court](#) at 21:00