

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Sermon for Late Dean Lubabalo Livingstone Ngewu
Diocesan Memorial Service, Pretoria Cathedral
16 February 2012

1 Thess 4:13-18; Jn 6:37-40; Ps 121

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, here we are, gathered before God, to mourn the death of our dear friend and brother, Lubabalo Livingstone Ngewu, and to seek God's comfort, God's strength, God's compassion; and, most of all, to seek the certainty of his promises of salvation and redemption, healing and wholeness, for this life and for the life to come.

I want to begin by thanking you, Bishop Jo, Chapter, and the whole Cathedral family, for your invitation to me to preach at this Memorial Service.

In my sermon, I hope to do three things. First, I want to share the word of God, offering God's own consolation to you, to the Ngewu family, and to all who loved Lubabalo, or Livingstone, as so many knew him. Second, I want to add my own tributes to those that have been given to him, for he was my friend also. And finally, I want to offer a challenge to you all.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we are gathered together here in the house of God, who is three and who is one. He is

- The Father, who watched his Son die in agony on the Cross;
- The Son, who wept at the grave of his friend, Lazarus; and
- The Spirit, who bears the deepest groanings of our hearts to the throne of grace.

Therefore, in the presence of this God of infinite love and mercy, the God who knows our inmost hearts, let us have courage to bring before him those deep groanings of our hearts; our weeping for our friend; our agonising over the brokenness of recent weeks and months.

Let us open ourselves in all our pain, to the God who is for us; the God who is with us; the God who is within us; the God who is among us – so that we may know his tender touch upon our lives; and hear his still small voice promising hope, and newness of life.

Let us dare to grieve today:

- to grieve for Lubabalo, for Livingstone, and for the hole his death will leave in our lives; and
- to grieve for all that feels lost, and for all we wish might have been different.

But, as our first reading urged us, let us not grieve as those who have no hope.

As Lubabalo himself would have been the first to remind us – let us turn to the one who is the Living Stone, and find in Jesus Christ a firm place to stand, in all the uncertainties and confusions that Lubabalo's death has brought us.

We lift up our eyes, and look: not to the hills, or anywhere else on earth, since there are no earth-bound answers for us; but we look to the Lord, who has made heaven and earth.

He is our keeper, our defence – and he is Lubabalo's keeper and defence also.

Jesus' own words, in our Gospel Reading, put this very clearly.

All that God the Father has entrusted to him, will come to him. No-one who comes to Christ will ever be driven away. It is God the Father's will; it is God the Son's will; that all who believe and trust in God will be raised up, to new and everlasting life.

This is the new life of which St John caught a glimpse in his Revelation: the life of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, when all the old things have passed away.

It is the life where God makes his home among his people, for ever; where he wipes away the tears from every eye; where there is no more death, no more crying, no more pain. In God's nearer presence there is no more grief; no more failure; no more misunderstandings and broken relationships; no more falling short of what God desires of us and what we desire to be and become by his grace.

Here, Jesus makes all things new: all broken hearts are mended; all shattered lives are restored; all wounds are healed; and all the imperfections of this life are made whole and new and fresh and bright and lovely and perfect within God's perfect love.

This is the fullness of life which we believe and trust – with all the certainty of the promises of God – that Lubabalo, that Livingstone, now enjoys: going from us to be with the Lord for ever.

These same promises are for us also – and not only when the time comes for our mortal lives to end.

For, as St Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans, Jesus Christ 'died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living' (Rom 14:9).

Jesus truly is Lord of both the dead and the living. His promises of redemption hold good for us here too – for us as individuals, and for us as the community of God's church, with all the brokenness and failings, the pains and conflicts, that characterise all human institutions.

For we must remember that we are all redeemed sinners, and we remain sinners, and fallible, to the ends of our lives on earth. And our church too, is fallible, and we make mistakes, and we get it wrong, even as, at the same time, God works within us and makes us his instruments, to spread his gospel and build his kingdom.

Therefore, as individuals, and as the church:

- whenever and wherever we need it – as we inevitably do, time and again, always and everywhere – God’s forgiveness is there for us, if we are only ready to open ourselves in humility to receive it.
- whenever and wherever we need it – as we inevitably do, time and again, always and everywhere – God’s redemption is also there for us, if we can accept it.

As St Paul puts it, We know – yes, we know - that in all things, God works for good, for those who love him, whom he has called according to his purposes (Rom 8:28).

This is not to say that all things, all situations, all events, are good. Far from it.

But no circumstance is so bad, or so sad, that God cannot or will not work in it for good.

There is no stumbling block that he cannot turn into a stepping stone – the Living Stone who is Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour.

So we come today, daring to believe this – and daring to ask that, by the power of Christ’s cross, his death and resurrection, God’s immeasurable goodness might be at work redemptively in our lives; in our relationships; in our differences and disagreements; in our church; here and now.

We dare to ask that he may comfort us in all our griefs – and here we pray especially for Lubabalo’s wife Nosipho; for their children Funeka, Xolani and Unathi; for their broader family; and for all those closest to Lubabalo and who most deeply mourn his passing.

Christ’s word to us is that we should not be afraid to weep, nor afraid to acknowledge the depths of our sadness, our depression, even our anger, that this death should come at this time.

We can be honest about all this to Jesus, who knows our breaking hearts, and desires to touch them with unimaginable tenderness. He encourages us with those famous words from the Sermon on the Mount ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.’

And because Jesus Christ is the Lord of both the living and the dead, we can offer to him all our unfinished business – all that we would like to say about Lubabalo, about Livingstone; all that we would like to say to him.

We can come to Christ with all our uncertainties, even our failures, about whether we could, or should, have spoken or acted differently.

Before Christ, we can remember Lubabalo / Livingstone with honesty – with all the love and affection, as well as the frustrations, that this remarkable child of God, provoked within us.

We remember someone larger than life – a big man, with great gifts and talents, especially of writing and speaking. A man with a strong personality, and, dare I say it, a strong will.

Yet most of all, I remember a man of great joy, a man of enormous laughter; and a man of deep faith – a man who influenced so many for good, and pointed so many towards a closer walk with Jesus, not least through his time as Rector of COTT.

We thank God for this man: for Lubabalo Livingstone Ngewu. We thank God for his blessings upon him; and for making him such a blessing to so many others and to the whole Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

Well done, good and faithful servant.

Finally, I said I would end with a challenge.

My first challenge is to you, Bishop Jo, to your Chapter, and to Diocesan officials. It is this: remember that the Canons have no authority over the dead. I urge you, before Lubabalo is buried next Tuesday, to drop all the outstanding charges against him. And hang his portrait, like those of all other deans, in the Cathedral vestry.

And there is a further challenge, to everyone who has been caught up in any way in these tragic disagreements: to all of you I say this: find it within your hearts to create time and space to begin a process of reconciliation and forgiveness. All of us are called to live out the Christian virtues which Livingstone so fully taught, and himself espoused and strived to follow. It is not just my challenge, but it is God's challenge – and also his encouragement and his promise – that we should dare to walk within his ways of mercy and peace.

So I end by once again thanking God for the life and ministry of our friend and brother, Dean Lubabalo Livingstone Ngewu.

Rest eternal grant to him, O Lord – and let perpetual light shine upon him.
May he rest in peace – and rise in Glory.

Amen.