

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Sermon for Eucharist – Christ the King, Sophiatown**  
**19 February 2012**

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Isaiah 43:18-25, 2 Cor 1:18-22, Mark 2:1-12

May I speak in the name of God, who puts his seal on us, and gives us his Spirit as the first instalment of all his redeeming promises.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, it is a great joy to be back in Sophiatown with you again. Thank you for the warm welcome you always give me, and my family. Thank you for your prayers for us, and for my ministry as Archbishop.

Today let me add particular thanks to Doctors Miranda and Mlungisi Kwini for their hospitality to so many of us at the blessing of their home yesterday.

As I said in my homily then, the blessing of a home is about far more than bricks and mortar. It is about the rededication of a family, to walk in the ways of God in every aspect of their lives, so that his blessing may come upon them, and make them a blessing to others.

Coming in humility before God; recognising that all we have is his gift; acknowledging our own dependence upon him; and committing ourselves to serve him, his church, his people, his world – all this is at the heart of the Christian life.

This is something we particularly reflect upon during Lent, which begins this Wednesday.

As part of this, we must inevitably reflect on our failings to be the people, and the church, that God calls us to be.

To use a very unfashionable word, we must reflect on our sins.

Today's gospel passage is precisely about sin, and sinfulness, and God's remedy, in Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

Jesus shows himself, by word and action, to be the one who can forgive sins; and free us – literally and figuratively – from the limitations and paralysis that affect sinful human life.

Sin and God's solution are my focus today.

I want to talk about why we, and the world around us, need a better understanding of both.

We need a better grasp of sin, a fuller acknowledgement of sin, in every area of life.

This means not only our personal life, our domestic life – but also (and this is my particular concern today) in public life.

By this I mean not only in politics at every level from national to local, from elected to official; but also in business, in professional life, in academia, in the media, in civil society, even within the communities where we live, and among whom we network and socialise.

The reason for emphasising sin this is not to back either ourselves or anyone else into corners of condemnation, by focussing on how bad we are.

Rather, the purpose is to open us up – ourselves, and also our church, our society, our world: to open us up to the glorious opportunities for God's salvation and redemption in every area of human life and activity.

Let's face it, we certainly need God's rescue and recovery in so much of society!

Yet if we do not acknowledge the existence of sin, how can we receive God's more than wonderful solution to sin?

We have to begin with honesty about what is wrong, if we are to receive God's free offer to put it right.

This raises the hard question of recognising our own part in what is awry.

Yet admitting guilt, or feeling shame, seem increasingly alien in today's society.

Sometimes it seems the only sin is being caught out. And, short of a criminal conviction, we are asked to believe, and act as if, everyone is more innocent than the proverbial dove.

While the law demands that, before the courts and in all judicial proceedings, people are to be treated as innocent until proven guilty, that is a little different from actually being innocent! This is why our jails are, rightly full of awaiting-trial detainees.

Further, no matter how dubious a person's reputation, or how dodgy their track record, if that person's suitability to hold office of some sort is questioned, then it seems that the questioner is the one branded as being in the wrong.

And when apologies are issued for something or other, have you noticed how often they are given, not in terms of an admission of wrong doing, or of inappropriate speech, but rather in terms of regret that someone was offended.

It is as if the offended person is actually being blamed for being too soft-skinned.

You only have to look through the pages of any issue of the Mail and Guardian to know the sort of thing I am talking about!

Why have we got ourselves into this position?

It seems to me that the main cause is as much about failing to understand salvation, as it is about failing to understand sin.

For if there is no hope of salvation – no hope of forgiveness, no hope of redemption, no hope of God wiping the slate clean of our guilt and our shame, and providing an

opportunity to make a fresh start – then no wonder we don't want to admit to being in the wrong.

And if there is nowhere to go, once we have admitted we are in the wrong, our fear is that we are stuck, completely stuck, in the naughty corner, so to speak.

Deep within ourselves, we do not want to stand under condemnation of any sort.

We see it in little children: 'Did you eat the chocolate cake?' we say. 'No Daddy' replies the small child, even when caught with a face smeared with icing!

And as adults, we are little better – though we may be far, far, more skilled at constructing (or having our spokespeople construct for us) sophisticated excuses about how, whatever it was we did – no matter how bad it turned out, or how awful the consequences – we really weren't at all responsible and should not be considered as having failed in any way, or as bearing any sort of guilt in the matter!

If there is no hope of forgiveness or of redemption, no wonder people try to avoid admitting they ever do anything in the slightest bit wrong.

But if no one is guilty of anything; if no one has failed, or fallen short, or let anyone down; if no situation is worse than it ought to be, or could be – then how can we go forward? How can we speak of righting wrongs, of addressing shortcomings, of doing better?

What a mess we are in! But, thanks be to God, we have a remedy!

For God too does not want us to be left standing under condemnation.

Therefore, as we well know, God sent 'his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (Jn 3:16).

And the next verse further underlines for us – should we have any lingering doubts – that God is far, far, more interested in liberating us from the quagmire of our weaknesses and failings, than he is in pronouncing us guilty.

It reads 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

And so, now we live in a world where Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, has taken away the sins of the world (cf Jn 1:29); where he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness (1 Pet 2:24).

We live in a world where forgiveness is freely offered for true repentance.

And it is not just a matter of going from 'guilty' to 'not guilty'.

The God of infinite love goes far, far, further – he promises to redeem all that has gone awry; to rescue what is lost; to heal what is hurt; to mend what is broken; to cleanse what is marred; to overturn evil and bring good out of every situation and circumstance.

'In all things, God works for good' St Paul writes to the Romans (Rom 8:28). It is not that all things are good – by no means, many are far, far, far from good. But there is no situation, no circumstance, which is so bad, so wrong, that God cannot turn it round and bring good out of it.

It is as though he sweeps up the mess, and turns it into something even better than the situation was in the first place.

All that it needs is for us to repent – to admit our failings, and our need of God's answer, on God's terms.

This is the essence of the gospel – which means 'good news' and truly is 'good news'.

The good news is that within the love of God, we find a safe place to be honest about how we fail, how we fall short, how we let others down, how we let ourselves down, how we let God down.

We can be honest about the things where we meant well, but screwed up.

We can be honest about when we just failed to pay attention, and made things worse.

We can be honest about the times we kept silent, when we ought to have spoken up.

We can be honest about when we just stood by, and let wrong things go ahead.

We can be honest about the times we were tempted and gave in.

And we can be honest about when we deliberately, knowingly, chose bad over good.

But when we dare to be honest; when we have the courage to put up our hand and genuinely and contritely admit our fault – then it is as though all the trumpets in heaven sound a blast of joy!

For now we have thrown the doors wide open, for God to bring in his salvation and redemption, in a far fuller way, into our lives, and into the specific situation.

For ourselves comes forgiveness, a wiping clean of the slate, and a process of healing within. Sometimes the burden of the wrongs we have done crush or distort or damage our true selves and God desires to put us right and set us free.

And then comes God's work of putting right and setting free all that has been crushed or distorted or harmed by our failures.

Sometimes this means he calls us to say what we need to say, or do what we need to do, to make amends as best we can.

For asking God for forgiveness doesn't mean we can just walk away, washing our hands of all responsibility – God may challenge us to step up, and do our duty.

This is hard too – but God promises to help us. When he asks us to do something, he also offers us the courage and strength to carry it out.

Indeed, such is the grace of God that he uses humanity to be the instruments of his redeeming work – he can use us too, as he brings good out of bad; fresh hope and possibility in place of discouragement and despair; new beginnings from old dead ends.

So then, what is the particular lesson for us today?

I think it is this – that we must be gospel people, in declaring that God forgives sins, through the way we live our lives.

We must demonstrate that we are not afraid of sin – not afraid to admit that we are ‘only human’, not afraid to admit that we are less than perfect, that we often fail, that we get things wrong, that we make mistakes, and even that we sometimes intentionally choose wrong over right.

And in declaring we are not afraid of sin, we also declare – even more loudly and clearly – that God desires to deal with sin: not through condemnation, but through salvation and redemption; through rescuing and restoring.

As the last verse of the Old Testament lesson put it, God says ‘I, I am He, who blots out your transgressions *for my own sake*.’ God’s greatest desire is to overcome evil with good, and his greatest desire is to help us also overcome evil with good, and replace wrong with right.

This is good news. It is very good news indeed, especially in a country where we know that there is much that is not as good as it could be, that needs improving. All we need to do is admit our shortcomings, and let God, in his infinite power and mercy and love, help us go forward!

We must make this the message of our lives – not only in the home, where perhaps such lessons make easier sense; but also in the public arena where admitting any sort of failure or wrongdoing is so counter cultural.

This is a glorious and wonderful promise – God wants to help us do better!

And we know his promises are true.

This is the message of the gospel reading. Jesus’ assertion that he can proclaim the forgiveness of sins is authenticated by his act of healing the paralysed man.

And so St Paul can write that Jesus is the ‘Yes!’, the ‘So be it!’, the Great Amen, to all God’s promises.

Let us therefore let God shape our lives, so we too are a people of forgiveness and new life – life in all its abundance – which is offered to all the world.

Amen