

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**‘100 Men and More Thanking God’**  
**St Philip’s District Six – 11 October 2008**

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Good evening! I was about to say ‘Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen’ but I realised we are all gentlemen – at least, I hope that all the men here tonight are actually gentlemen!!

Rector, Wardens and Parish Councillors of St Phillip the Deacon, thank you for your invitation.

This is my first ‘thank you’ tonight, as I speak about thanking God, and, in particular, thanking God for the influence of certain men in my life.

Let me start with the theme of thankfulness, of gratitude.

As I said in my Charge, at my installation way back in March (it sometimes seems a *long* time ago!) – as I said then, ‘Christian thinkers from the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez to Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, insist that gratitude must be our first response to all we receive from God in Christ.’

In fact, everything that exists, is received from God in Christ.

Perhaps you know the story about the scientists who think they have discovered the secret of creating life. So they challenge God to a duel, and God accepts.

‘You go first’ they say to God. So God bends down, takes a handful of earth, spits on it to make mud, rolls it in his hands to create the shape of a puppy, and breathes into it. Off it runs, wagging its tail, full of exuberant life.

‘OK’ God says to the scientists, ‘now it’s your turn.’

They too bend down to take up a handful of dust. ‘No, no, no!’ says God ‘You can’t just use my earth – create your own!’

Everything that exists is a gift from God.

More than that, every moment of our existence is sustained by the continuing presence of his life-giving Spirit.

This gift of life itself is our first reason to be thankful.

Especially since I became a father, I have learnt to give particular thanks for the Fatherhood of God.

He inspires me to strive to be a parent, a father, in ways that transcend, even redeem, my own experiences of the fallibilities of human fathers.

I had a difficult relationship with my own father. Apartheid ground him down, and I knew him as a man who felt failure – the failure of being unable to protect his family from poverty and forced removals; the failure of an extra-marital affair; the failure of an uncontrollable temper.

He died in his sleep, when I was 17, drained by the hardships of life. Yet he had loved us, and we had loved him, and I learnt a lot from him, even in difficult times.

One of his great sayings was: “Ha hona kgomo ya boroko.” You cannot get a cow through laziness. Growing up in Alexandra was very, very, tough; but he taught me the value of hard work, and he taught me to be grateful for opportunities to work, and earn that cow!

Yes, now I can give thanks for my father. Now I feel compassion where before I often felt anger and hurt. I have found redemption in those painful memories.

Developing the ‘attitude of gratitude’ is an immensely powerful way of finding God’s redemption within our lives.

St Paul told the Thessalonians: ‘Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.’ (1 Thess 5:16-19)

He does not mean that we should give thanks *for* all circumstances. But he does mean that we must recognise God can and will work *in* all circumstances.

We may not be able to change our circumstances, and we cannot change the facts of our past.

But we can change the way we see them; and we can learn not to be enslaved by events, and not to let the past hold us captive and continue to oppress us, even years later.

Gandhi – the Mahatma, the one ‘of great soul’ – one of my inspirations, had this to say:

‘The moment the slave resolves that he will no longer be a slave, his fetters fall. He frees himself and shows the way to others. Freedom and slavery are mental states.’

Yet we often need help in finding this mental, emotional, freedom.

The good news is that this is certainly God’s will for us, in Christ Jesus. This is what gospel liberation is about.

For we are those who live with thanks not only for our creation, but also for our redemption.

And redemption is not only for life after death – redemption begins within us here and now, and for this, my gratitude to Jesus is beyond measure.

This is why we must, as St Paul wrote, ‘pray without ceasing’, opening ourselves to let God’s spirit flow through us unquenched.

I want to consider how we can learn to see God’s redemption at work more clearly, and experience it more fully.

Developing an ‘attitude of gratitude’ is one hugely effective way of training the eyes of our souls to see the finger prints of God in the details of our past and present.

If you can make a habit of this, it is one of the most powerful ways I know both of walking more closely with God, and of finding his liberation from events and memories that would enslave us.

Let me explain.

Perhaps, like me, your past held situations and events that are still painful to you, that stir you up, even as you sit here.

Now, just pause. Take a deep breath... and breathe out. And again ...

As you are sitting quietly, breathing gently, remember that you are in the presence of the God who loves you more than you can ever fully grasp. Yes, God loves you.

Close your eyes, and say to yourself ‘God loves me’.

Perhaps it helps if you place your hand over your heart, and think of God’s loving presence with all those who have given their lives to Jesus.

Now, slowly and gently, ask Jesus to bring to your heart, to your mind, to your awareness, some one, some man, from your past, for whom you are grateful.

[*Pause*]

Ignore images of those for whom you are least grateful – even if they press in on you. In the stillness, let God bring to your heart someone for whom you are most grateful.

There, what do you have? I am sure there is someone – perhaps a surprising someone!

And perhaps with that person has come memories of how they appreciated and affirmed you, encouraged you, mentored you, let you know that you were special – all messages of love that God wants you to know.

Perhaps they exhibited God's presence in other ways – perhaps their lives bore the fruit of the spirit, showing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control.

Perhaps they inspired you to become more fully the person that God, in his delight, created you to be. Perhaps you even think of them as someone who, in some way, saved your life.

Whoever they were, whatever reasons they give you for gratitude – thank God for them now, in the silence of your heart.

[Pause]

God does not want us to deny our past – but he wants us to know that he was there, and that he can set us free from its enslaving embrace. As the Prophet Joel says, he will redeem the 'locust years'.

Now, I would not be being honest, if I did not include my mother alongside those men who formed my early life. After my father died, she raised the five of us – and often filled his role. She became my role model in many ways. When things were tough, she lit a candle and prayed – and she still does. This straightforward act has characterised my family's simple faith and reliance on prayer.

Also, when it comes to prayer, one man for whom I am enormously grateful is Bishop David Beetge, who died suddenly last month.

As Dean of the Province, he helped and supported me hugely since I became Archbishop. But far, far, more than that, I am grateful to him as a man of intense prayer, profound spirituality, and deep, mystical faith.

David became my spiritual director twenty-one years ago, when I was a seminarian, and he guided me through the early years of ordination, including the turbulence of the 1990s.

He helped me to develop these habits of listening to God, learning to see him in the little things of life, and so being able to align my life more closely with his leading.

Learning to see God in the little things is particularly hard for us as South African Christians. For many decades, Church life was dominated by one big problem, one simple answer – apartheid was wrong, and it had to go.

Well, apartheid has gone and democracy has come – and with it a society that has a great range of issues on the table at any one time, often very complicated, with complex relationships between them – and there are no simple answers.

Sometimes people worry that the church has lost its vision as it grapples with so many different issues; and because honest faithful Christians often disagree on questions such as the death penalty, or human sexuality.

No, the church has not lost its vision. Today's vision of God, however, is not focused almost exclusively on a single question.

We need to learn to see God at work in the mess and muddle that is normal democratic life.

And we need to help others to see God at work in this way – so that each of us can find our path through the complexities of our own lives.

Let me put it another way, starting with another man for whom I am profoundly grateful – Bishop Desmond.

Desmond Tutu, like Nelson Mandela, possessed a gift for expressing profound truths with great simplicity. As democracy came, the Arch gave us a vision of hope for abundant new life for everyone, transformed through God's promises.

But turning vision into concrete action is hard work.

Archbishop Njongo, our so-called 'Canon Bureaucrat', was exactly the successor we needed to build practical bridges from vision to reality – not least in the long overdue restructuring of this diocese. (I am certainly grateful that he achieved this!)

South Africa at the political level also found its visionary replaced by a technocrat – a technocrat who lost touch with those he was supposed to lead.

For, sadly, our government has been failing on service delivery. The democratic vision has not been delivered in ways that make a tangible, sustainable, lasting difference to those in greatest need of change.

The same question faces the Church. We must ask ourselves 'Are we doing "service delivery"?'

By this, I do not mean, are we running effective social development programmes on poverty, HIV and AIDS, the environment, and the other needs around us. They are vital, but they are not our number one calling.

My question is this: are we doing 'service delivery' with the Gospel?

Are people, are we, experiencing tangibly, for ourselves, God's promises in Jesus Christ of healing and wholeness, of forgiveness and reconciliation and new hope? Are we receiving liberation from what enslaves us, and new freedom?

Here we are talking about the one gospel, expressed not in a single big answer, but in millions of different and concrete ways, in the particular circumstances of every individual's life.

We have a God who numbers the hairs on all of our heads – if we still have hair!

Cultivating the attitude of gratitude, not only for people – but for events, encounters, circumstances, is a means for seeing God deliver his made-to-measure gospel, tailored precisely to our individual needs.

The way to do this is to take a few minutes once a day if you can, and be still in God's loving presence, and then – much as we did just now – ask him to bring to your heart the moment of that day for which you are most grateful.

And then, in prayerful conversation with God, take time to appreciate that moment, and thank him for it, and ponder how it reflects the very nature of God himself.

If you did this every day, you would be amazed at the long list of things to be thankful for. You would be stunned at all the evidence, that you had never noticed before, of God's active presence!

And when you have done with thanksgiving, then talk to God about those events with which you struggled, for which you are not grateful – though perhaps you have already found sparks of light and hope and love, even in those tough times!

Perhaps you cannot do this every day, though this is the best habit to develop. Instead – or even as well – you can sit down and reflect on a whole week; or at New Year you could reflect on the previous 12 months. Or you could take time to consider some period from the past.

I have found that cultivating the habit of doing this daily – or as near as I can – helps me become more aware of God not only later, but in the very moments when I am receiving his grace. So I am able to feel gratitude there and then.

More than this, being aware of God's presence, God's prompting, often helps me to react and respond in God's way.

And when I have difficult memories from the past, asking my loving God to connect me to well-springs of gratitude, has helped me to find God's redemption for those memories.

Sometimes I have recognised grace present that I had never seen before. Sometimes I find that through some past experience he gives me vital insight or

resources for dealing with something here and now. Sometimes he offers me the opportunity to put down some heavy burden I have been carrying, and just let it go.

But whatever it is, pausing to become aware of gratitude puts me in touch with the power of God's redeeming love.

How can we pass up on such a wonderful gift? So, cultivate an attitude of gratitude and let God change and direct your life!

Before I conclude, I must mention one more influential man: the man who opened my eyes to the meaning of jazz, Trevor Huddleston!

Just as he wrote that the task of the church to speak truth to power, so he claimed that this message of subversion comes just as clearly from the haunting lyricism of Hugh Masekela and his trumpet!

Well, that was for me the beginning of a love of jazz, so let me end here, and let us enjoy the music!