

To the Laos - Archbishop Dr Thabo Makgoba's Christmas letter to his faithful and beyond

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Dear People of God

A blessed and joyful Christmas to you all! May the love of God overflow in you and all those you love, this festive season, as you share in celebrating the greatest Christmas present of all, God's gift of himself, Emmanuel – God with us, always and everywhere, no matter what we face in life.

There is a story about a small girl, who was taken by her granny to see the nativity scene at her local church. 'Isn't that beautiful?' said the granny. 'Look at all the animals, and Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus.' 'Yes, Granny' replied the little girl, 'it's lovely, but there's one thing I don't understand. Isn't baby Jesus ever going to grow up? He's still the same size he was last year.'

Whether the story is true, I have no idea. But I do know that sometimes we concentrate on Christ's infancy, and fail to grasp that Christmas is at least as much about his deity – the eternal Word taking flesh, to be the Saviour of the world. His complete vulnerability and weakness as a tiny baby points to the vulnerability and weakness he will embrace as he allows himself to be crucified for the sins of the world, to bring healing and redemption wherever there is brokenness and destruction, and to overcome death so we might have life in abundance, in this world, and in all eternity.

St John the Evangelist, in the famous words that begin his gospel, speaks of Christ being to us a light in our darkness, a light that no darkness can put out. These words of course resonate more strongly at Christmas time in the northern hemisphere winter, but even in the height of our southern summer, I find them powerfully speaking of the promise of true hope, no matter how bleak our circumstances.

The hope we have in Christ, for this world and the world to come, was very much in evidence at the beginning of December, when I fulfilled a long-standing desire to go to Namibia, to participate in ordinations. It was especially moving to visit Northern Namibia, where so many wars were fought, and so many lives destroyed. Though what Namibia faced was unique, there are many similarities, as well as interconnections, with South Africa's apartheid history. Achieving independence in 1990, they were an inspiration for many of us as we hoped and prayed to follow a similar path to freedom and justice. St Mary's Mission at Odibo, in Ovamboland, is one of the oldest Anglican centres in the country, in time building not only a church, but also a school and seminary, and a hospital. The Mission produced many clerics and political leaders, and educated the current President of Namibia as well as the present Bishop and his two predecessors. The iconic leader, Herman Andimba Toivojo Toivo, who spent 16 years on Robben Island, was both a pupil and a teacher at the Mission school.

The Angolan border is only 5 minutes away, and this area was ravaged by the South African Defence Force, with much destruction and loss of life. Ruins from those times, including of our seminary building, are still evident, while the emotional, spiritual and physical scars remain among people on both sides of the border (as well as among those who were exiled there, or coerced by the SADF into fighting an illegal and unjust war there), as I saw when I made a brief excursion into Angola, and felt in exchanges with Bishop Andre Soares and 4 of his clergy, who in turn came to join us in Odibo.

Yet, against such a dark background, the light shone, as we gathered for the ordination of 38 deacons and 2 priests. Present with us where the President of Namibia, the governor of the North, the Queen mother of the North, and the head of the local council, and I was able to voice a public apology for all that South Africa had done during the illegal occupations. I stressed how knowing and making known the truth of this terrible past and its atrocities can become, through Christ's redemptive power, a means for us to find healing, and to be made his conduits for reconciliation and peace-building. As Christmas draws near, it seems to me that in bringing, as we must, our stories, our memories, our woundedness, to Jesus, we are almost offering them as the Wise Men offered their gifts, the marks of their own lives, kneeling before the infant king – so that he can transform them for his own, life-giving, purposes.

The Wise Men came to the manger because they had spent long years learning how to interpret the heavens, and so recognised the importance of the star when it appeared. I said to those being ordained that reading the signs of the times is the task of all Christian leaders, so that we can bring to bear the truths of the gospel, with all its promises of life and liberty, wherever we find war, death, oppression and their lasting effects at work. This is God's promise for Namibians, and for all his children throughout his world. And so we must not be afraid to speak truth to power, and be responsive to the needs of God's people, whom we are called to serve through joining in God's mission. In ordination, in particular, we aspire to be like the prophet Isaiah, responding to God's call by saying 'Here am I, send me!' (Is 6:8) Yet, the words of St Paul in Romans 12, which are also read at ordination services, remind us that this response finds its place within a far wider missional context of presenting ourselves as 'living sacrifices'. (This is, of course, an essential part of the incarnation – culminating in Christ's sacrificial death upon the cross.) St Paul goes on to remind us that we must not 'think too highly of ourselves', but rather find our place within the body of Christ, the Church, called to serve one another with whatever gifts we are privileged to receive; and together to serve the world around us. 'Peace be with you! As the Father sends me, so I send you' said the risen Christ to his disciples, in our Gospel passage (Jn 20:19-23) – and this is still his message and his call to all who would follow him.

The ordination of 40 deacons was the fruit of a 3-year ministry formation course, promoted by Bishop Nathaniel and his team, the Dean, retired Bishop Petrus, and Fr Katenga, the able young cleric who steered the 3 year ministry formation course: study by correspondence, with support both from COTT and the US, funded by Trinity Wall Street and USPG. I congratulate them all on taking theological formation so seriously. I am delighted that some of those who followed the course will go on to pursue Masters and Doctoral studies. The importance of having well trained theologians, who can themselves become theological educators, cannot be underestimated, and is one of the key planks of our commitment to theological education within our ACSA vision.

My visit to Namibia came as COP-17 was ending, and drove home the message that our reading of signs of the times must also include both political awareness, and responsiveness to the scientifically measurable changes that we see in our environment – from flooding to droughts and desertification. We need to recognise the effects of human activity on our surroundings, and respond appropriately.

I've written about Namibia at some length, so you may all pray for this vast Diocese, in its many needs. If some of you feel moved to offer support to a Namibian student at COTT for 3 years, please get in touch with the PEO at Bishops court. COTT too needs our support, including resources to upgrade the college so we can continue training future generations of servant leaders for God's people and God's world.

So then, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may you all have a wonderful celebration of Christmas – worshipping the Christ-child, but also growing in your own knowledge and love of God so you may not be mere 'children, tossed to and fro and blown about' by every difficulty and temptation that comes your way, but rather may come 'to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.' (Eph 4:13,14). To him be glory in his church, now at Christmas, and always.

Yours in the service of Christ
+Thabo Cape Town

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