

Sunday, 6 September 2015

Homily at a Prayer Service for Bishop Emeritus Charles Albertyn and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu

Preached at the Church of the Resurrection, Bonteheuwel, Cape Town:

"Oaks of Righteousness"

Isaiah

61:1-3

The Good News of Deliverance
The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to provide comfort to all who mourn;
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

Thank you all for coming both to celebrate the presence in our lives of both Bishop Emeritus Charles and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond and to pray for their healing, and the healing of all who are ill.

Both Bishop Charles and Archbishop Desmond are, in the words of Isaiah, indeed "oaks of righteousness" who have brought and -- by the way they live their lives -- continue to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and to comfort those who mourn.

Before turning to our readings, let's reminisce and recall those characteristics they have in common which endear them so much to us.

When one speaks to people around the dioceses of the Western and Northern Cape -- the old, enormous Diocese of Cape Town for which they shared responsibility with their other episcopal colleagues -- perhaps the most striking gift they were known for was their deep spirituality and centredness on God and how they could laugh at themselves and minister to others through laughter.

They are no different in retirement. Visiting Bishop Charles in his ward, there was an RSV Bible prominently at his side, even though he was not able to refer to it at the time I was there. It was the same as soon as I stepped into Archbishop Desmond's hospital room -- the Bible was at his side. And the day before he came out, he shared with me the prayer intentions of the Order of St Julian of Norwich -- an order in which he is an Oblate -- which was alongside him on his bed. His life testifies to the power of prayer in helping us to discern what what God is calling us to do and to strengthen our resolve that God's will be done. Prayer and worship remain at the centre of his life, whether he's in hospital or at home, on a plane or a train -- he has an unchanging spiritual routine and discipline.

Of course, being Archbishop Desmond, he also had an iPad and iPhone in bed with him -- instruments of modern technology which he uses to continue to reach out into the world to support others: to encourage them, to joke with them, to make them feel good about themselves, to console them, to inspire them, and to assure them of his prayers.

He and Bishop Charles also share an extraordinary capacity to use laughter to overcome difficult moments, to ease tensions and thus to give glory to God.

There are wonderful stories about Bishop Charles's deep wisdom and quick wit. For example, when he wanted to tell people that they might be right in what they thought, but that pursuing the course they were determined to pursue was perhaps not a good idea, he would tell the story of the man at a pedestrian crossing. If the man saw that he had right of way, but that a car was speeding towards him too fast to stop, and the man decided to obey the little green man and cross, Bishop Charles would say, yes, the man would be right: but he would be "dead right".

Think also of how he joked that when accosted by people at traffic lights in Modderdam Road, wanting to clean his windscreen with a rag and a bucket of dirty water, he would say: "I will pay you NOT to clean my windscreen." Or of how, marching just behind Archbishop Desmond on the streets of Cape Town, he said he preferred protest marches under apartheid, which were always stopped by the police after a few yards. After marches became legal, he complained, he had to walk the whole distance.

And remember how they both laughed during Archbishop's Desmond's 80th birthday celebrations, when Bishop Charles forgot that he was down to preach and came in late in his wheelchair.

Or course, Archbishop Desmond's use of humour and laughter to leaven his message during the most bleak moments of our struggle are legendary, from his Van der Merwe stories to his jokes against himself. And when I visited Archbishop Desmond recently, he laughed so much that he cried. He reminded me that When we buried Archbishop Philip Russell, his predecessor, and he invited me to read part of the liturgy on his iPad, and I declined, he said that "I know that it's because you don't know how to use an iPad." And I have to confess now that he was right!

So as we reflect on how their special qualities of leadership and service sustain and empower us, consider how the words of Isaiah, in stating his confidence that "the spirit of the Lord is upon me," suggest that healing is not only physical. Healing is also liberation from anxiety, it is easing heartache, it is helping us to face in the eye the reality that, in the end, death comes to all of us. That reality was recognised in an exchange with Bishop Charlie and Berenice on June 16 this year. After the diocesan soccer tournament, Father Jerome Francis and I went to visit them at home. As I was leaving, he said, "Archbishop, can you see that old black dial-up phone?" I said "Yes." He said, "It is not connected and that is why the good Lord can't call me back home. But I am ready for him." At which I retorted, "Don't worry, St Michael has misplaced your file and you will be with us for a long time."

The spirit of the Lord brings us the assurance of God's ever-present comfort, whether we are retired or in active ministry, or both, whether we are ill or healthy. For those of us who are trying to emulate Bishop Charles and Archbishop Desmond in our ministry today, the spirit of the Lord encourages us not to be faint-spirited but to act courageously, to face the challenges of our own times, the most important of which in South Africa today is to usher in justice for all our people, especially those living in the squalid conditions of our vast informal settlements.

In Psalm 121, the psalmist affirms that help will come from the Lord, that we can confidently turn to God for the strength to do what we are called to do, because God watches every step and movement we make, even the pulse of our heart or the movement of our breathing. And the dramatic story that we heard from Mark, in which Jesus, as the Gospel puts it, "makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak", tells us that when it comes to healing, God is in charge.

Of course in these days of modern medicine, God has enabled us, with the gifts he has given us, to offer opportunities for healing we have never had before. And that brings us full circle, back to Isaiah, which urges all of us here, today, now, to bring good news to the oppressed. We need to ask: is it good news for the oppressed when our public health system in parts of South Africa is falling apart? Is it good news for the oppressed when, at the same time, those of us with money or a good private medical scheme can go to private hospitals. Is it good news for the oppressed when some of us can get what Archbishop Desmond describes as medical treatment which ranks with the best in the world, and others must suffer as a result of the failures of management in our hospitals?

Down the main road next to Tokai, down at the bottom end of town and on the main road in Claremont, new hospitals are being built or older ones undergoing massive renovation. Private hospitals are sprouting up everywhere, charging high fees which as a result make them inaccessible to most of our people. Even for clergy, the church is struggling to get to grips with the rising costs of medical care. The difference between the way he is being treated and the fate of most of our compatriots is a deep source of distress to Archbishop Desmond.

As people of faith, let us approach the world with the eyes of God, seeking the mind of Christ in the varied challenges we face. These are myriad, from global warming to the desperate conditions in which so many of our people live. But today, let us re-commit ourselves to working for a public health system which will bring good medical care to all. Following Jesus' example of simplicity, let us work for good primary health care in our clinics. Let us bring our existing public health facilities, the hospitals and the clinics, up to scratch so that the money we already spend on them is used more efficiently. And let's advocate for the national health scheme which our Minister of Health is working hard to introduce.

The spirit of the Lord is upon me. The spirit of the Lord is upon each one of you. Lord, heal our land and people, and begin with me.

Amen

Posted by [Anglican Media Office, Bishops court](#) at 20:09