

Saturday, 9 May 2015

Graduation Address at the School of Theology University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee

Commencement Convocation of the School of Theology University of the South, Sewanee, Tenn.

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba

Isaiah 46:3-5; Psalm 27:5-11; Hebrews 10:19-24; John 4:23-26

Graduates and your families, guests, fellow honoree Bishop Skirving, Bishop Howard, Bishop Alexander, Vice-Chancellor McCardell, sisters and brothers in Christ:

Firstly, congratulations to all of you who are graduating, and especially to your families who have prayed for you and supported you in a myriad of other ways.

My warm thanks to you, Bishop Alexander, and the School of Theology, for doing me the honour of asking me [to join you on Commencement day](#). It is a great privilege to come up here on the Cumberland Plateau and to follow in the footsteps of my predecessor but one, Archbishop Tutu, who came here in 1988 to be similarly honoured. I am especially pleased to be able to visit the University of the South, this great institution of the Episcopal Church, because education is one of the top missional priorities in our Province of the Anglican Church.

In our Province's Mission Statement, which we call ACT, we say the Anglican community in Southern Africa seeks to be:

- Anchored in the love of Christ,
- Committed to God's Mission, and
- Transformed by the Holy Spirit.

To that end we say that across the diverse countries and cultures of our region, we seek:

- To honour God in worship that feeds and empowers us for faithful witness and service;
- To embody and proclaim the message of God's redemptive hope and healing for people and creation; and
- To grow communities of faith that form, inform, and transform those who follow Christ.

We go on to list one of our priorities – the one about which I am most passionate – as “the protection and nurture of children and young people.”

To this end we have formed an Anglican Board of Education for Southern Africa, which will draw on our church's rich history, going back to the 19th century, of providing good schooling for the sons and daughters of both black and white South Africans. Through this board we aim to support existing church schools, to strengthen public schools in our communities and to establish new Christian schools which are easily accessible to the disadvantaged.

In the field of theological education, it is a particular privilege to come to Sewanee and to be recognised by the institution which is the home of the Sewanee Theological Review and which, I have read, has been named one of 27 "Seminaries that Change the World". That is a signal achievement, on which you are to be congratulated. I have also read that we have a shared history in our struggles over desegregation -- whereas you resolved that issue in the theological school more than 60 years ago, we were still confronting it just over 20 years ago. Until then we had three colleges, one historically white and two historically black, and although we had begun to desegregate the individual colleges, it was not without anguish and struggle that we decided, partly for financial reasons, to close all three down and establish a new college with a new name for the democratic era in South Africa.

Now we are proud to have as our provincial theological seminary the single, united, appropriately-named College of the Transfiguration, which has recently been accredited to offer a bachelor's degree in theology and to which we have just appointed our first woman rector. The college, and my seat at Bishops court, are also the sites from which we have launched what we call in our Province the "E-Reader" project, which will give students, clergy and lay people access to electronic resources via tablet computers. This project may sound like old hat to you in the United States with well-stocked theological libraries, but for us in Africa it is very new and exciting. For it will help our people, and especially our seminary students, not only in my home province of Southern Africa but across the whole African continent, where Internet access is growing rapidly but where Anglican theological colleges have desperately under-resourced libraries. Perhaps we could explore how we could partner in these areas.

Our lessons for today are focussed on hope and the assurance of salvation and deliverance. The psalmist begs for these too. The New Testament affirms this and challenges that we should provoke each other to do good deeds. Then, after Jesus has a long talk with the "other" – who in the passage we read is a Samaritan, a despised one, and a woman at that – he brings her from a shallow understanding to deeper confession and conversion, and makes the woman of Samaria a "disciple" too.

The questions I want to put today are: how do we follow Jesus' example today? Firstly, if we are to follow him faithfully, the challenge for us is to worship truthfully and wholeheartedly, in body, soul and mind; and to reach deeply into ourselves and into the resources others give us in search of understanding of the things of God. Then, I want

to issue a challenge to you, the graduating students of Sewanee who are going out from this place, this place in which you have been nurtured and prepared to minister to the people of God; I want to ask you: Who for you is the Samaritan woman? Who is the Samaritan woman in the U.S. and elsewhere? What are the deeper issues facing God's people in the locality in which you minister? What are the conversions needed? What are the local, national and international spiritual and systemic issues that are preventing true worship and discipleship?

Of course I can't answer those questions for you. You need to work out the answers for yourselves, within your own context. But let me tell you a little of my context, and of what I wrestle with as I seek answers for myself, in the hope that my story might help you as you seek your own answers to your own challenges.



The Archbishop with, from left, Bishop James Tengatenga, Chair of the Anglican Consultative Council and a visiting professor at Sewanee and Bishop John Howard, Chancellor of the university.

I come from a huge Province of the Anglican Church that covers six independent nations in Southern Africa and two islands in the South Atlantic Ocean. I was born into an African royal family in the northernmost part of South Africa, but the place in which I actually grew up and found my faith was a tiny, filthy, crowded, segregated area for blacks called Alexandra Township in Johannesburg. Alexandra is also known by its residents as the “dark city” because for many decades, although it sits cheek-by-jowl alongside Africa's wealthiest square mile in the place they call the city of gold, we had no electricity. I can still smell the unique odours characterized Alexandra Township as I was growing up: stagnant water, buckets of human waste and the rotting corpses of dogs. It was a place infested by gangsters in which the pressure to join a gang was intense. I still have a scar on my lip from a gangster was trying to steal a golf club I was carrying.

But Alexandra was also a place in which we caught locusts and larks and ate them for lunch, where we drank goat's milk straight from the teat. As children, we launched raids into a white suburb across the valley to relieve the residents of the milk bottles outside their houses (I now know as a bishop that to “relieve” them actually meant to steal their milk). In the words of Nelson Mandela, who lived in Alexandra Township when he first came to Johannesburg long before I was born, life there was both precarious and exhilarating. It was also where I first understood faith in a play staged at a nearby

school. And it was there that I had my conversion experience during the schoolchildren's uprising against apartheid in the 1970s, when I was saved from arrest or even death by a local mechanic who argued with police while I hid, weeping, scared, covered in oil – and praying – under a car he was repairing. Later, travelling in Soweto to school on the 7.13 AM train, I was attracted to a particular carriage in which the same group of commuters would gather day by day, singing to the clanging of a cow bell on their way to work. There I was moved by what might be called itinerant preachers, whose prayers spoke to their congregation's sense of desperation, pain and fear, but also to their hopes.

So my faith was shaped in the squalor of Alexandra, rooted in a belief in the God who saves, the God of hope, and nurtured by people such as Desmond Tutu. Right from the beginning, for me there has never been a distinction between the public and the private, the political and personal when it comes to matters of faith and their application. For I hold, and most of us in South Africa, hold – to quote Psalm 24 verse 1 – that “The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof”, and therefore nothing in all creation and nothing in human activity lies beyond the concern of God. God’s judging eye and his promise of salvation bear upon everything and everyone, all that we are and all that we do. God’s business is the business of his people and his Church and thus it is a calling of all believers, the baptised, to participate in the mission of God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son not to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. And so as an archbishop formed in the Anglican tradition, I see it as my calling to address issues of morality and justice in politics and economics just as in religious and social life, both challenging and acting as pastor to those in the corridors of power and the nation as a whole.

You will each have your own story of how God found you. For me the story of Alexandra Township is a story of redemption; that against all the odds God found me. And I am strengthened by the knowledge that my actions are rooted in worship. Worship and action go together. When I speak out against the abuse of power, against the greed and corruption which are the sources of conflict in our part of the world, I do so knowing that God abides in me and I abide in him, just as when you speak up courageously for Jesus in your context, God abides in you and you in him.

Let me finish with a word about our beloved Anglican Communion, in which we have seen brokenness and division damage the relationships between us as sisters and brothers in Christ. I believe that in the Communion we have created what I call the enemy within. We have created unnecessary conflict. We have used the Internet and the social media to label the other, to hurt the other, to divide ourselves from the other and to encourage blind hatred instead of seeing love in the other. We need to embark on a process of evangelization and transform the social media and the Internet from being what they are right now, as a source of conflict, a source of division, and turn them into a source of good and a source of communication. We are, after all, called to

be bearers of Good News and to locate the points at which the fabric of our Communion is broken and to mend them through the work of the Holy Spirit. Who is better equipped to do this than this university?

As you go out into the world, my hope for you, for me, for your Church, for our Church, for the Communion as a whole and for all our nations, is that as we walk with Jesus, he will enable us to explore our faith and its consequences in more depth; to deepen our spirituality; to empower us to convert and transform the societies in which we live and thus to bring new life and hope to God's world.

May God bless all of you now, and in what lies ahead.

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