

Sunday, 4 February 2018

Sermon preached at the 150th anniversary celebration of Leliebloem House, Cape Town

A sermon preached by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba at the 150th anniversary celebration of Leliebloem House, Cape Town, on February 4, 2018.

Readings: Isaiah 40:21-31, Ps 147:1-11, 1 Cor 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39

May I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's a great joy to be with you today as we celebrate with Leliebloem 150 years of service to the community. History tells us that in 1868 Bishop Robert Gray established the House of Mercy as a refuge for women in Plein Street. Archdeacon Lightfoot made the initial donation for this initiative and the Society of St John the Evangelist (SSJE) made a generous input to its establishment.

This is one of the most critical centres in our community, offering services that are vital to the livelihood of humankind today. Leliebloem's philosophy speaks of something dear to my heart – upholding a Christian ethos in service to God, across different backgrounds of belief, culture and religion.

Leliebloem, like our other institutions such as Zonnebloem, St Michael's and St George's, were formed in the Diocese with the responsibility of addressing the social ills that affect young and old, rich and poor, and black and white in our communities. They grew out of our efforts to care for God's people in the midst of all the challenges they faced.

The experiences of those who are now, and down the years have been, served by these homes might be compared to those in today's Old Testament reading (Is 40:21-31), who have gone through the experience of exile. In the circumstances they faced, they have been estranged from the lives they knew. When a people is in exile, estranged from God's purposes, or when we, or the children in our communities, are estranged from those who were around them, what are the feelings which that experience engenders?

Isaiah in today's reading presents to us a different world from that of Hezekiah, immersed in the situation foretold, from which he was so thankful to escape. Also, we see the coming of the victorious God and the grant of unfailing strength for the weary exiles. Isaiah is a book that unveils the full dimensions of God's judgement and salvation. God is "the Holy One of Israel" who must punish his rebellious people but will afterwards redeem them.

Isaiah wrote during the stormy period marking the expansion of the Assyrian empire and the decline of Israel. Assyria assisted Judah to conquer the northern kingdom around 722 B.C. and this made Judah more vulnerable. Isaiah warned Judah that her sin would bring captivity at the hands of Babylon. Although the fall of Jerusalem would not take place until 585 BC, Isaiah assumed the demise of Judah and went on to predict the restoration of the people from captivity. God would redeem his people from Babylon just as he rescued them from Egypt.

Israel was a nation blind and deaf, a vineyard that will be trampled, a people devoid of justice or righteousness. The awful judgement that will be unleashed upon Israel and all nations that defy God is called "the day of the Lord." Although Israel has a foretaste of that day, the nations bear its full power. It is a day associated with Christ's second coming and the accompanying judgement. God's judgement is referred to as fire. He is the Sovereign Lord, far above all nations and rulers.

Yet according to Isaiah, God will have compassion on his people and will rescue them from both political and spiritual oppression. Their restoration is like a new exodus as God redeems them and saves them. He will make streams spring up in their desert as he graciously leads them home.

In today's reading (Is 40:21-31) apparently some Israelite doubters were comparing their God with the gods of their captors and they believed that the Lord was failing the test. God then invited them to look at the heavens and asked them who created the stars and gives rain (Is 40:26). This is the same question that was asked of Job (38:28) in his theophany. Job was confronted with rhetorical questions and God said nothing about his sufferings, nor does he address Job's problem about divine justice. Job gets neither a bill of indictment nor a verdict of innocence. But more important, God does not humiliate nor condemn him – which surely would have been the case if the counsellors had been right. And so by implication Job is vindicated and later vindication is affirmed. So the divine discourse then succeed in bringing Job to complete faith in God's goodness without his receiving a direct answer to his question.

Looking at our New Testament reading, the context is a city over whose behaviour Paul is distressed,

Corinth, a city whose people are in danger of estranging themselves from God. In the reading from Corinthians (1 Cor 9:16-23) Paul emphasises that he has numerous rights which he did not claim because of his love for the Corinthians. Admonishing them, he says that the Lord has laid on him the necessity of preaching the gospel.

Corinth was a city that was a crossroad for travellers and traders. It had two harbours, Cenchrea and Lechaion, which enabled goods to flow through the city from Italy and Spain to the west and from Asia Minor, Phoenicia and Egypt to the east. The people of Corinth were interested in Greek philosophy and placed a high premium on wisdom. They had 12 temples, among which three were the most notable. There was the one dedicated to Aphrodite – the goddess of love whose worshippers practiced religious prostitution; the one dedicated to Asclepius – the god of healing; and the one dedicated to Apollo, who has been called god of many things, including music, poetry, art, oracles, archery, plague, medicine, sun, light and knowledge.

Like any large commercial city, Corinth was a centre for open and unbridled immorality. Paul therefore here wrestles with the problems in Christian conduct in the church, addressing progressive sanctification and continued development of holiness of character. Paul's reward in preaching was not in material things but in proclaiming that he had preached to Corinth without charge and did not take advantage of the rights he deserved (food, drink, shelter and pay). Not only did Paul not use his right to material support in preaching the gospel but he also deprived himself (by curtailing his personal privileges and social and religious rights) in dealing with different kinds of people, to win and to bring them to Christ.

In the Gospel reading, (Mk 1:29-39), Mark depicts Jesus entering an ordinary home. That home, that of Simon and Andrew, becomes almost a headquarters for Jesus when he is in Galilee. There Simon's mother-in-law was healed by Jesus. The rapidity and completeness of the cure is indicated by the fact that, without any of the exhaustion and debility generally consequent upon such a fever, the restored woman served them at the Sabbath meal after the synagogue service. The physically sick were classified differently from those possessed by demons. But in this instance, the news that Jesus had healed a woman attracted people who came flocking towards the door of the house. Soon a dense crowd formed. Jesus did not fail them, for the divine compassion and power are always put forth in response to the appeal and acknowledgement of human need, and he went on both to cure many who were sick and to cast out others who were possessed by demons. Jesus's awareness of these evil spirits is an example of the truth stated in James 2:19: "Even the demons believe and shudder". There are no atheists in the realm of the devil !

As we consider these readings, let us look at the hope they brought to the people of those times, and the hope they can bring for us, for Leliebloem House and for other institutions like it in the Diocese.

As members of the Leliebloem House community, what questions would you ask God in the light of social injustice today? What perceptions of God would you have today? What answers would you expect from God for yourselves? Would you be like Israelites in exile and compare God with other gods? Or would you be like Job and question the integrity of God?

No, if we hear the message of today's readings, we should draw on the hope they provide. Isaiah challenged the exiled in their understanding of God and pointed them to God for justice and mercy; he held up a torch, a beacon of hope, saying that God is able to answer all our needs, even if not always in the way we want him to.

We celebrated the conversion of St Paul just the other day. An ordinary human being, Paul was transformed on the road to Damascus and became the most prolific writer in the New Testament. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul too – like Isaiah – holds up a torch of hope.

And Mark depicts Jesus entering an ordinary home, the house of Simon, demonstrating the miracle of the Incarnation by transforming an earthly home for the better by driving out demons, making it a sacred place to continue his teaching and his healing ministry.

All three readings testify to the presence of despair – in Isaiah despair of being in exile, in Corinthians the despair of being trapped by the ills of that city, and in Mark the despair of sickness and being trapped by demons. But once there is faith, there is redemption and salvation.

As we celebrate 150 years of Leliebloem, we can look back and recall or imagine the despair that we and our forebears experienced when we have seen the social ills of the society in which we live. But we can also acknowledge and celebrate the hope that you and your predecessors have brought to people's lives, life-giving hope for generation after generation.

What can be said about Leliebloem in the next 150 years? Are we doing enough in our homes? Shouldn't the different homes in the Diocese be working more closely together? Is government doing enough? Should

we be challenging provincial and national government more to step up and help with more resources and more efficiently? What can be done to improve on what we have? On a wider, social level, what might be the demons of our times?

I have been concerned in recent days by the controversy in the business press about Capitec bank. In recent years Capitec has played a leading role in bringing simple, low-cost banking to millions of people in the kind of communities which this and other homes in the Diocese serve. It also gives loans to people who find it difficult to get loans from other banks because they don't have the assets to use as security for the loans.

But this last week a research report described Capitec as a "loan shark... masquerading as a community finance provider", resulting in the bank's share price plunging. In turn the Reserve Bank and the Treasury have defended Capitec and there is a suggestion that the authors of the report had suspect motives in wanting to cash in on the falling share price. But my main concern is that most of the commentary so far is focussed on whether investors' money in Capitec is safe, and not on the bank's customers.

Very real questions remain – not only for Capitec but for other financial institutions as well – as to whether they are lending people more than they can ever repay, obliging them to pay bigger and bigger amounts of interest, sinking them deeper and deeper into debts they will never escape. This surely requires our critical scrutiny – in the same way as civil society has challenged our Social Development Minister for facilitating the behaviour of companies which make money on the side when government social grants are paid out to the poor.

Let us give thanks today for all of you, for children, parents, staff, the board, volunteers – for all who serve in numerous ways – for what you do for Leliebloem House and to improve children's lives. Special thanks and congratulations to our donors and sponsors for your magnificent generosity. Keep up the good work.

May we all strive to make our homes places where God's people may find love, comfort, tranquillity and peace; homes, like the home of Simon, where people find the Person of Jesus.

Happy 150th thanksgiving celebrations. God bless.

Posted by [Anglican Media Office, Bishopscourt](#) at 12:46 

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