

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
160th Anniversary Patronal Festival
St George's Cathedral, 4 May 2008

1 Kings 8:22-30; 1 Peter 2:4-9; Matthew 21:12-16

May I speak in the name of God, Alpha and Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come. Amen.

It is a great pleasure to be with you this morning. But I must say it is a relief not to be surrounded by TV cameras on every side, like the last time I was here!

The service of Installation and Rededication was very much a new beginning, the start of a new chapter in my life, and in the life of the Diocese and Province.

Yet, as I said in my Charge that day, I was also very conscious of following in the footsteps of the journeying pilgrims of the last 160 years of Anglican Church in Southern Africa.

Today, we honour and celebrate those 160 years, and the legacy of Robert and Sophy Gray, on which so many have built. We also honour and celebrate the life of worship, witness and service, of this Cathedral since its foundation. And we thank God for our participation in the body of Christ, along with all the saints of every age – especially remembering St George, and the inspiration so many have drawn from his faithful life and death.

There is so much to celebrate, to give thanks for, and to reflect upon for our own lives. Firstly and always, I give thanks to God in Jesus Christ for the mystery of the incarnation and the hope that this knowledge gives for our daily lives.

Celebration, thanksgiving and reflection are echoed in the themes of this year's anniversary, which are:

- Interpreting our Heritage
- Witnessing in our Present
- Visioning our Future.

Past, Present and Future – all are held in the hand of God in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, God who is Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, who is both outside of time and present in every moment: sustaining and redeeming life, and making all things new.

In recent months, I have been very conscious of endings and beginnings. Chapters have been closing, and doors opening, bringing a great welter of emotions. Old orders have been coming to an end, and new ways of life starting. Yet I also see how much of what went before was actually leading to this point, and, more than that, will carry me into all that lies ahead.

I know that I must interpret my personal heritage, and the heritage of my church, in order to be able to live faithfully today in the light of Christ, and so learn to envision what he desires for the future.

This is something each of us experiences at various turning points in our lives; and it is something we also experience together, within the body of Christ, within our local parish and church – even where our church happens to be a Cathedral!

It is as though I, and all of us, are called

- to borrow from the past
- in order to make sense of the present,
- and thus pave the way for the future.

This is my particular task, in my new life at Bishops court. And I have been reflecting on what it means for my ministry within this Diocese and Province, as well as within the countries that make up the Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

Let me share some of my initial thoughts, reflections and ideas.

There are many reasons to remember Robert Gray this year. In over twenty five years of episcopal ministry, he followed the maxim 'preach the gospel, build churches, plant clergy'. When he arrived, there were ten Anglican churches in Southern Africa. When he died, there were sixty three, and a Province of six dioceses. He and Sophy, who did so much to support him, were God's amazing gift to future generations of Southern African Christians.

We also remember him as we approach July's Lambeth Conference. The very first Lambeth Conference, in 1867, came about largely because of disagreements between Bishop Gray and Bishop Colenso, the Bishop of Natal. To a considerable degree, the heart of the question was how to remain faithful to the Bible, and to Christian and Anglican tradition, while at the same time expressing the gospel authentically within the culture of the day.

Well, in that sense nothing much has changed! Anglicans are still arguing about how to express the truths of Scripture within contemporary culture!

But we should realise that inculturating the gospel – which is, as I said in my Charge, working out who is God in Jesus Christ for us here and now – this is something everyone must inevitably wrestle to find, in every time and place. If

Anglicans understood this part of our heritage better, then there might be less fear, tension and polarisation in today's disagreements.

There is another lesson to learn from Bishop Gray's time, and from later, contrasting, experiences within our Church.

Bishop Gray excommunicated Bishop Colenso. It was a terrible breach. Today we recognise that Bishop Colenso was a pioneer in biblical scholarship, cross-cultural mission and the pursuit of social justice. But we cannot turn back the clock on the consequences of that breakdown of relationships.

In contrast, the Anglican Church largely held together through the difficult years of apartheid. Instead of turning our backs on one another, we kept on talking – we dialogued, disagreed and argued, but we did not stop speaking to each other.

Today our witness reflects the richness of our diversity, as we live in unity in Christ, across all our dioceses and nations and languages and cultures. This was very evident at my Installation.

The lesson is that sons and daughters of the living God need to hold on to each other, no matter what. For if we are brothers and sisters in Christ, we are inevitably related to each other, with a family bond that cannot be broken.

We must admit that it is not always easy when we have so many different styles, backgrounds, perspectives and experiences. But part of our witness in Southern Africa today is to declare that God is bigger, his love is bigger – and his love holds us together.

He is the one who takes us as living stones, each with a particular place to be set, a unique role to fulfil – and he builds us together into a spiritual house, where there is room for everyone.

Of course, there are some differences that need to be dealt with – especially the differences that come with poverty, and the inequalities rooted in our past.

This is where we need to ask God to help us envision the future he desires for us.

The God who calls us to be his chosen race, his royal priesthood, his holy nation is the God of reconciliation and the God of restoration.

Reconciliation is about overcoming all that separates us from God, and from each other.

Reconciliation does not mean making all of us the same, as if there were no differences of diversity between us.

I wonder if we have fully understood this, when we speak of continuing reconciliation within our nation?

We, the church, the diverse and united people of the reconciling God, have such an important role to play here in interpreting our heritage. The witness of our present life can help our country envision, and build, a flourishing future for every citizen, with all our legitimate diversity.

In the past, every aspect of life was dominated by one single issue. Today, like most countries of our world, we face a host of complex issues, jostling for our attention: poverty, crime, education, and health; alongside such broad questions as the nature of democracy and open debate, and our role in Zimbabwe and on the wider international stage.

In the past we knew what the answer was: end apartheid. Today, neither we, nor the rest of the world, has easy answers.

The whole shape of life is different to that with which we grew up. What does this mean for the voice of the church, and of this Cathedral, today?

St George's was a significant place in our past – and we give thanks today for the way it has been used by God. How do you, do we, continue to play such a role, in today's complicated world?

To return again to the Charge: this also is a matter of discovering afresh what is it to be the body of Christ in our time, and who God is in Jesus Christ, for us here and now.

Even while much of what we face is the same as the rest of the world, we face it differently, because of our different heritage – the heritage of brokenness and bruising, pain and suffering, distortion and division, which left no-one untouched.

Therefore, alongside all the remedies which the rest of the world wrestles to discover and implement, we must bring an added dimension, rooted in Christ's reconciliation and forgiveness.

We need to note the sources of continuing pain and division, particularly due to historical sin or unfairness; and we need to find ways for restoring right ways for the future. That is, we need to highlight the restorative aspect of reconciliation if it is to be real reconciliation.

As Desmond Tutu has said, forgiveness and reconciliation go hand in hand. True forgiveness deals with the past and makes the future possible.

For us to borrow from the past, make sense of the present, and pave the way for the future, reconciliation and forgiveness remain the key.

But perhaps we need to re-envision these for today and tomorrow, and the Church's engagement with them.

Perhaps today we need to be more 'bottom up' alongside 'top down'. The public rhetoric of nation building must be matched with bringing the full reality of reconciliation and forgiveness to the level of diocese, parish, congregation, family, home and individual.

The Church must maintain its voice in public debate – but we must equally be the church of the people, that pastors each person with the love of the Good Shepherd.

Peter's first letter talks of us being made a chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation for a purpose – so that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

This is our witness: not only that he called our country out of the darkness of apartheid and into the light of a new era – but for everyone who still struggles with the burdens, pains, brokenness of that dark past, there is the promise of being called and drawn into a new and marvellous light.

People of God, people of St George's, I look out from this pulpit, and it is as if I look at the microcosm of our church, our nation, represented by you, in all your diversity. What might it mean for you to be this beacon of light for every individual who still lives with darkness: for everyone in your congregation, and for those whom your ministry touches week by week?

How might you continue to be pioneers of God's message of reconciliation in the changing circumstances of today and tomorrow?

My prayer is that through this year's celebrations and reflections, you will find and learn to live your new vision.

And my request is that you will be partners with me, in seeking and expressing God's new vision for us all.

So may the God who dwells in heaven hear us, and make this Cathedral a house of prayer; a place that proclaims his mighty acts, and declares his call from darkness into his marvellous light – for this city, this nation, and for every precious child of God within it.

Amen.