

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Sermon for Luanda – Angola Visit
5 August 2012

2 Sam 12:15b-25; Eph 4:1-6; Jn 6:24-35

Em nome do Pai e do Filho e do Espírito Santo. May I speak in the name of God, who feeds us with the bread of life. Amen.

Dear People of God of the Diocese of Angola, dear sisters and brothers in Christ, let me say again what a great joy it is to be with you.

Thank you, Bishop Andre, for your invitation.

Thank you to everyone who has made my wife Lungi and me and our team feel so welcome.

Thank you to everyone who has prepared today's service, who is taking part, or who is helping behind the scenes. And thank you, especially, senhor translator.

Yet, most of all, today our 'thank you's are to God.

We give thanks for his faithfulness, as we celebrate the tenth anniversary of this Missionary Diocese.

We thank God for Bishop Andre, and his leadership; for Janata and family; for Diocesan Chapter, and for all your partners in developing the church in Angola.

And we thank God for the amazing growth that there has been here – growth in clergy; in churches, chapelries and congregations; and in people.

We also give thanks to God, for the partners he has sent to us – to help encourage and nurture and sustain this growth.

We give thanks to God for USPG, for MANNA, for ALMA, and for ERD.

We thank God for them and all the other people and organisations who have given their support in many different ways, and helped us achieve so much – from Nets for Africa through to theological education!

God has been very good to the Anglicans of Angola!

And so we celebrate!

And it has been such a joy to spend time with you in Angola, especially yesterday in Uige and here today.

It has been my privilege to meet the Governor of Uige Province, as well as clergy and people there; and today I am honoured by the presence of the Vice-President, the Director of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the Chair of the Council of Churches.

In my time here, I have met both with powerful and with simple people; I have seen and smelt and touched both poverty and wealth. I have visited city and village, dry dusty land, lakes and sea; I have witnessed glitz and glamour alongside desperate want; I have seen collapsing rural homes, tin houses, and luxury residences; I have met despair, but I have also found great optimism.

And it is with optimism – God’s hope – in my heart, that I am delighted to be here, sharing God’s word with you today: not only as we look to the past with gratitude in our hearts; but as we also look to the future, with hope and trust.

Yesterday, in Uige, we heard in our readings about Jeremiah and John the Baptist, and I spoke of God’s call to you all to be his faithful prophets.

I spoke about how he calls you to explore in your own lives what it means to be Gospel people – so you can model and share God’s good news to Angola, after all the suffering of the past that this nation and all its people have seen.

I spoke of how the risen Christ still bears the scars of his suffering – though he is now ascended and sits at the right hand, where he prays for us.

He knows what it is to suffer, to feel pain, to face death, to experience dying – and so he prays for all who suffer, or who bear the scars of their own past.

And yet his scars are no barrier to his receiving the fullness of resurrection life.

This is what he promises to you today.

Whatever your own scars, or the scars of your community, the promises of Jesus Christ are for you.

He promises to bind up the broken-hearted, heal the wounded, comfort those who mourn, and bring hope to the despairing.

He calls you, his people, the body of Christ in this place, to explore together this newness of life; to discover together a newness of relationships across all the old divisions; and to share with your communities and your nation what this gospel means.

He calls you to model the new life that his redemption offers. This is the way to be faithful prophets, to be beacons of hope, to this country and its people.

We find the same call in today’s readings.

St Paul writes, ‘Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.’

He challenges the Christians of Ephesus to live lives of humility and gentleness.

He calls them to be patient with one another; to bear with one another in love.

He exhorts them to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

I am sure the words written by St Paul to the Ephesians, almost two thousand years ago, were also written to be a message of encouragement and hope to you, and to your country.

Violence and conflict, pain and suffering, enmity and division, have wounded and scarred this beautiful land, with its lush vegetation and rich forests.

And they have wounded and scarred the people of God, within this church, within this Diocese.

Yet God, today, has words of comfort, of hope, of newness of life, for you all – for his people, and for his world.

Today he challenges you to embrace this vision of fresh beginnings – to let him bring redemption to the past, and offer a new future.

It does not matter how bad the past is – God's power of redemption is greater. That is what we learn from our first lesson today.

King David had made a married woman pregnant, and arranged her husband's death in a terrible act of treachery.

The child of this liaison died.

But because David was repentant, and because he turned to God, God gave him a new beginning – and with Bathsheba he had another child, who became King Solomon.

Nobody is too bad for God to redeem.

This is a hard lesson for us to learn, even within the church – where we may find ourselves at the altar rail of the Lord, kneeling close by someone whom we used to think of as our enemy.

As St Paul rightly says, there is only 'one body and one Spirit' – if I am in Christ, and you are in Christ, then we are inevitably members together of the one body, no matter how different, how divided, we may feel ourselves to be; nor how much we have hurt one another, whether in the war or through other traumas of life.

Even if we are far apart in human terms, if we are in Christ who makes us one, we can dare to live together, knowing we share 'the one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.'

What a vision of hope!

And if we can dare to pursue it with confidence, we can challenge others to pursue it also.

This is what it means to live prophetically within Angola.

This is God's hope for the healing of the past.

And we also find here his promise for the future – in St Paul's exhortation to 'lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.'

For building a new, free and democratic country brings many challenges. We know this too in South Africa!

Among the greatest temptations – especially when there is such a flood of foreign investment – are to put self-interest first, and to be greedy for status and power and wealth.

And whether it is out-and-out corruption, or unfairly favouring family and friends; or bending rules – all of it will damage and undermine every effort to build a future in which all can flourish.

God's people must take the lead in showing a better way: the way of honesty and truth, of highest ethical standards; setting aside material concerns and the powers of patronage.

God's people must speak up for those who are small and weak and poor – ensuring those in greatest need come first, and not the great and strong and powerful

The very best of good governance, transparency, accountability, fair dealing, not only reflect God's holiness. They are also the best means of delivering God's good purposes of abundant life for everybody.

Dear people of God of Angola, dear brothers and sisters in Christ – perhaps you are daunted by this call to be faithful prophets, and to show your nation what it means to live a life worthy of your calling, worthy of the gift of peace and freedom and democracy which God has brought to you.

Do not be daunted.

For, as our gospel reading tells us – Jesus himself is the Bread of Life.

He will feed you – giving you life; his own life, to share with the world.

He will strengthen you so you can follow his call faithfully.

That strengthening is for your inner life: so you will have his wisdom to know what to do, what to say; and then you will find the courage to act and speak in this way.

Remember Jesus' words today, as you come to the altar – remember it whenever you join him at his table.

Come with hands outstretched and open: open to offer him everything that you are, without reservation; and open to receive whatever he has for you, without reservation.

And remember his words – they are for you:

'Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.'

Receive from him – so others may see all that he does for you, and so may also have courage to come forward and receive for themselves good gifts from his hands.

So may he bless you richly – and make you a rich blessing to others.

Amen.