

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Grassy Park**  
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**Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 (Good News Bible)**

**1** Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel together at Shechem. He called the elders, the leaders, the judges, and the officers of Israel, and they came into the presence of God. **2** Joshua said to all the people ...

**14** ... "Honour the Lord and serve him sincerely and faithfully. Get rid of the gods which your ancestors used to worship in Mesopotamia and in Egypt, and serve only the Lord. **15** If you are not willing to serve him, decide today whom you will serve, the gods your ancestors worshipped in Mesopotamia or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are now living. As for my family and me, we will serve the Lord." **16** The people replied, "We would never leave the Lord to serve other gods! **17** The Lord our God brought our fathers and us out of slavery in Egypt, and we saw the miracles that he performed. He kept us safe wherever we went among all the nations through which we passed. **18** As we advanced into this land, the Lord drove out all the Amorites who lived here. So we also will serve the Lord; he is our God."

**John 6:55-69**

**55** For my flesh is the real food; my blood is the real drink. **56** Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood live in me, and I live in them. **57** The living Father sent me, and because of him I live also. In the same way whoever eats me will live because of me. **58** This, then, is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the bread that your ancestors ate, but then later died. Those who eat this bread will live forever." **59** Jesus said this as he taught in the synagogue in Capernaum. **60** Many of his followers heard this and said, "This teaching is too hard. Who can listen to it?" **61** Without being told, Jesus knew that they were grumbling about this, so he said to them, "Does this make you want to give up? **62** Suppose, then, that you should see the Son of Man go back up to the place where he was before? **63** What gives life is God's Spirit; human power is of no use at all. The words I have spoken to you bring God's life-giving Spirit. **64** Yet some of you do not believe." (Jesus knew from the very beginning who were the ones that would not believe and which one would betray him.) **65** And he added, "This is the very reason I told you that no people can come to me unless the Father makes it possible for them to do so." **66** Because of this, many of Jesus' followers turned back and would not go with him any more. **67** So he asked the twelve disciples, "And you - would you also like to leave?" **68** Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. **69** And now we believe and know that you are the Holy One who has come from God."

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

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear People of God of Good Shepherd, Grassy Park, let me say again how glad I am to be with you today.

Thank you for your invitation. Thank you, Father Clifford, Father Laurencious; thank you Wardens and Council; thank you everyone participating in this service, its preparations, and the refreshments afterwards.

I am especially grateful for your tolerance, in making me so welcome, when, because of my busy diary, I come one whole year late, to celebrate your centenary!

So I offer my heartfelt congratulations on your one-hundred-and-first birthday!

But I gather that I am right on time for the centenary of the Mothers Union!

So congratulations to you, also! I am delighted to be able to share this celebration – and to bless the new Banner and Altar Cloth that mark this occasion.

Reaching a major milestone is always a good moment for pausing and taking stock.

We might do it on a significant birthday – 18, 21, or those big numbers that end with a zero!

We might do it on an anniversary – and, if it is a wedding anniversary, I hope husbands and wives will reflect together.

We are all encouraged to do it as each old year ends, each new year begins.

Or perhaps we do it at some other significant moment – at confirmation, or starting at varsity, or changing jobs, or on retirement, or some other new beginning or fresh chapter in our life.

In the midst of whatever celebrations or activities are happening, it is good to pause, make space, and stop and reflect.

It is a time for looking back, first of all, on all that has been; and then, of course, to look forward.

This is what was happening in our first reading.

Joshua was the successor to Moses. Moses brought the people of God out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, and right to the borders of the Promised Land.

Then he died. And God gave Joshua the responsibility of taking them into the Promised Land, and helping them establish themselves not as wanderers in the desert; but as a settled people, with a settled worshipping life that provided the rhythm and structure for all of their society.

Now Joshua himself was very old. He knew his life was at an end; and he knew that the old life of the people of God was at an end – that life of travelling and learning to settle.

Now they had established themselves – and it was going to be up to them what life they would lead in the future, without Moses or Joshua to guide them.

So Joshua called the leaders of the people together; and he invited them to reflect on their past and on their future.

Well, we didn't hear the whole story in the verses that were read to us – but Joshua began by reminding them of all that the Lord had done for them in the past.

Therefore, he said, he and his family would continue to serve the Lord, whatever the future brought.

And he challenged them to do the same; and to give up allegiance to the competing so-called gods either of the past (of Mesopotamia and Egypt), or of the present and future (those of the land into which they had moved).

The leaders of the people reflected on their past – and drew their conclusions.

They affirmed that it was the Lord their God, who brought them out of slavery, who kept them safe, and who led them to where they were today – and so, as they looked to the future, with all its unknowns, they would serve the Lord. He would be their God.

This was their powerful testimony.

What is your testimony today, as you look back on the history of this parish?

And what is your testimony today, as you look back on the history of this nation?

We too have had a difficult past – one in which we and our forebears did not know freedom.

We too have been on a long journey from oppression to liberty.

We too have come to a place for which we longed – seeing it as a sort of ‘promised land’, though now we have the challenge of living in it!

As we look back, we too see God’s hand at work.

We see God’s hand in the lives of the pioneers of the parish, so many of whom gave so sacrificially for so long, to establish this church and all that it has achieved within this community.

To all of them, we are grateful – and we are grateful to God who gave them the vision that drove them, and the strength to pursue it.

We see God’s hand in those who brought us to a new democratic era founded on the highest ideals that are enshrined in one of the best Constitutions in the world.

To all of them, we are grateful – and we are grateful to God who gave them the vision that drove them, and the strength to pursue it.

It is God, not the church, not any political party or human institution, who is ultimately behind all that is good that has come our way.

And now, today, we have a lot in common with those people to whom Joshua spoke.

The stage was set for their new life. They had been in the Promised Land for a few years. Some of that experience had been good – but there were areas where they had not upheld God's standards, and things had not gone well.

Going forward, they had to make a choice – which path would they follow?

'We will serve the Lord' they declared. 'He is our God.'

I am sure you see the parallels, not only for this Church, but, even more so, for the nation of South Africa.

Since 1994, the stage has been set for our new life. A lot has happened that has been good – and we should not overlook the achievements of the past 18 years.

Yet there have also been failings.

There has been a serious lack of urgency, commitment, and achievement in relation to service delivery in so many sectors.

There are serious problems in relation to corruption that further undermines the ability of citizens to receive what they should from government, and adds to the growing inequality.

And all of this fuels anger and frustration – which we have seen spilling over everywhere from the N2 protests to the tragedy that unfolded at the Marikana Mine.

The challenge to us is to stand up and clearly proclaim that in the midst of all this, 'We will serve the Lord. He is our God.'

Dear people of God of Good Shepherd, Grassy Park, take courage, like the leaders of Joshua's time.

Take courage like the disciples to whom Jesus spoke.

Our Gospel reading described how many people, who had initially been inspired by Jesus' life and teaching, were now turning away.

It seemed that they looked around at the challenges of their own lives, and found the call of Jesus too demanding, too idealistic.

Sure, they had problems. But they could pretty much live with them. The better life of which Jesus spoke required too much of a commitment from them.

And so, says St John, in his gospel, they turned back, and would not go with Jesus any more.

They returned to their old gods – of complacency, of taking the easy way out, of going through the motions with religious observances that offer meaningless platitudes and avoid any real challenge or call to change.

But Simon Peter speaks up for the rest of them, as he says, 'Lord, to whom else would we go? You alone have the words of eternal life.'

He has seen what Jesus offers – he has had a taste of what is possible, in the new life of the Kingdom of God.

And he knows that nothing else will satisfy.

'We believe and know that you are the Holy One who has come from God' says Simon Peter.

He has reached the same conclusion as the leaders of Joshua's time, in effect saying 'We will serve you – you are our God.'

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as you pass these landmarks in the history of the Church of the Good Shepherd, Grassy Park, this is the same challenge is before you.

Will you serve Jesus, your God? Will you do so for the sake of this community, for the sake of this nation?

What might it mean to make such a commitment?

What is the vision of the future that God is putting before you?

What sort of society do you believe God wants you to work for, in Grassy Park, in Cape Town, in South Africa?

What sort of church is he calling you to be? What kind of church community do you want to become, to leave to your children and to their children?

And what is he saying to you – as individuals, couples, families?

The way to answer these questions lies in looking back and looking forward. It lies with Jesus Christ and the real, abundant, life, he offers.

Let me invite you now to do a little of that looking back.

Call to mind a time, an occasion, when you really felt connected to God, to the Lord, to Jesus.

It might have been a joyful time. It might have been when you were really battling – for God often touches us very profoundly at such times.

Just pause for a moment and reflect on what this connectedness felt like.

[Pause]

What was it like? What did you feel?

A sense of reassurance? Of being loved, accepted, cherished? Perhaps it felt like encouragement? Relief? Light and joy? Lightness of spirit, and shedding burdens? A new sense of purpose and energy?

Perhaps deep inner peace – or a conviction that, even in crises, things will turn out OK, and that you are safe in God's hands? A sense of being truly alive, and going forward, and growing?

I see heads nodding! We may have experienced connectedness to God in different ways, but when we take time to reflect, we recognise it in ourselves and in others.

And, remembering all this, what do we feel now?

We feel a sense of 'Yes!' within us – a good feeling, an affirmation, this is how things ought to be.

It is the conviction that, if we go forwards connected with God, we will be on the right tracks!

All this is rather different from seeking so-called 'happiness' in the way that we all too often find it portrayed by Hollywood, or on TV. It's not about being beautiful or rich or famous – some of today's fake 'gods'. We see from the gossip columns how these things guarantee no lasting happiness.

Nor is it like the high of partying, or alcohol, or drugs – which might, or so we hope, take us away from ourselves, from our problems, at least for a short while – but which dumps us straight back in them, often feeling hung-over and worse than before.

With God we find a deep and enduring satisfaction. It is about the peace – the shalom – of God that brings a wholeness and a rightness into our innermost being.

It is about increasingly experiencing the life of the life-giving Spirit, of whom Jesus spoke in our gospel reading.

It is about the spirit within us, responding to God's call – so that, as we look back, we are encouraged to look forward and say with Simon Peter 'Lord, to whom else would we go? You have the words that give eternal life' – and to say with the ancient Hebrew people, 'We will serve the Lord ... he is our God.'

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ – this is my prayer for you today: that as you live into this new century in the life of the Church of the Good Shepherd, you will find the Holy Spirit of God writing in your hearts this commitment to follow the voice of the Good Shepherd himself, as he calls you to follow him.

And I pray you may do so with holy joy, great courage, and deep confidence – knowing that he will sustain you on your journey with the real food, the real drink, of his body and blood, as you share together in his heavenly banquet week by week.

May he bless you, and bless this community, and this city, and this country through you and all those whom he calls.

Amen.