

GOOD FRIDAY SERVICE

hosted by the

DIAKONIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

on
6TH April 2007

At the International Convention Centre (ICC), Durban

Theme: We Overcome Through The Cross

Sermon given by Bishop Rubin Phillip, Anglican Bishop of Natal

“ The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of the sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” Luke 4: 18 - 19

With these words from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus began his ministry among the people to whom he was sent. But we know from our general reading of the Bible that Jesus did not only **preach Good News**, but that his preaching was **accompanied by good works**, such as freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, liberating the imprisoned. Yes, Jesus came to proclaim in words and deeds the real meaning of Isaiah, which was the Kingdom of God: the rule of love, freedom, justice and mercy. At the heart of Jesus’ ministry and mission was not only the transformation of the human spirit but also the transformation of the conditions in which people find themselves: the unjust structures and policies which crush the spirit, diminish life and cause misery and suffering.

We must be cautious, dear friends, that we do not simply privatise and spiritualise the message of Jesus, but that we also see in it the strong social – even political – implications. Let us be reminded that God did not address the problems of this world from the safety of heaven, but rather chose to come among us and to be in solidarity with us, and therefore with all our struggles for a just society.

Our focus in this Good Friday Service is on poverty: in particular on the churches’ response to serious poverty-related issues here in KwaZulu-Natal. And who can deny that poverty is a huge blot on our national life? Since 1994 we have had a democratic government in place, which has brought with it expectations of a better life. We have celebrated the establishment of a constitutional democracy with its stress on freedom from discrimination, more equal opportunities and a better quality of life for all.

However the fact is that the majority of our people continue to live in poverty. And to live in poverty is, to put it bluntly, to live without dignity and self-respect. It is to suffer, emotionally and physically, as Christ did on the Cross of Calvary. Poverty has to be a most dehumanising thing!

To reflect on the Cross of Christ on this solemn day in the life of Christians is not simply to look to a distant and past event, removed from and unrelated to our immediate circumstances. Rather it is to see the Christ of the Cross among his people now: standing in their midst, sharing in their pain, feeling their indignity, experiencing their nakedness, hearing their cries, knowing their hunger.

As I say these words, I can't help but think of our neighbours, our brothers and sisters, in Zimbabwe. These are dark times for them. Like Jesus on the Cross, they too must be crying out in despair as he did: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And how it must break the heart of God when he hears their cries and sees their suffering.

But I suspect that God's heart is broken even more when he observes just how feeble and muted is the voice of the church, not to mention the voices of our business and political leaders, in the face of this abandonment. I wonder how many people in Zimbabwe will go to bed today without enough food, in a land where some 80% of the population is unemployed and inflation is running at over 2000%? I wonder how many people will be beaten up and imprisoned for simply coming together to pray, as was the case a few days ago? And since when has a prayer gathering become a crime? It just demonstrates how bankrupt the Mugabe regime has become.

Instead of silence, the churches must continue to pressure our political leaders in SADC, especially our own president, President Thabo Mbeki, to adopt a more aggressive problem-solving approach to Zimbabwe's crisis, and not give in to Mr Mugabe's rantings and ravings. But equally importantly, we, the churches, also need to move out of our comfort zones and to actively seek peaceful, non-violent ways to guarantee change in that country, whose people stood by us in our struggle against apartheid. We cannot abandon them now! The Cross is about being in solidarity with suffering humanity everywhere, including in Zimbabwe and, of course, here in South Africa.

Returning to South Africa, and to our focus on poverty, a year ago Diakonia published '*The Oikos Journey*.' This document provides us with a theological reflection and an analysis of the systems that keep the poor in their place. It looks at the economic injustices in society and how the churches might respond to them.

It is important that we turn our solemn reflections on the connection between the Cross and poverty into practical ways of addressing the problem of poverty. Allow me to suggest three ways in which we can address this problem. These are based on the suggestions set out in '*The Oikos Journey*.'

Firstly, we must exercise a **PASTORAL** ministry, that is to say a ministry of care and compassion to those who are in need. This may include providing food parcels, being involved in home-based care of those with HIV/AIDS, providing counselling and so on. The church is well positioned to do these things. However, this "welfare approach" to addressing the huge problems facing us is important, but it is not enough. We also need to become involved in projects that are **developmental** in nature, such as skills training.

Secondly, we can and ought to develop **PARTNERSHIPS** with organisations which are working towards the eradication of poverty, such as such as NGO'S, business, government and so on.

Thirdly, we need to be **PROPHETIC**, in that we must challenge all unjust structures and policies in society that maintain and even create poverty. This is a tough thing to do, to be **prophetic**: to speak truth to power, especially to those in government. These are our friends, not our foes. We fought apartheid together, and we therefore do not wish to offend them. But this is not a reason for not speaking out: for not being prophetic, in other words. And those in positions of power should welcome, and not be threatened by such action. For, after all, our sole intention is to see our leaders succeed, and the only way we can measure success is by the way we care for the poor and needy, nothing less!

But there is another reason why we are not exercising our prophetic ministry, and that is that we have become too pre-occupied with the interior life of the church and therefore have forgotten what it means to be salt and light in society. I am not for one minute suggesting that what I call 'the interior life of the church' – our liturgies, pastoral care etc – are less important. Far from it! But I am saying that we need to discover afresh, and act with passion and commitment on, the mandate to preach Good News to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed. Unless we do these things we may be in danger of becoming increasingly irrelevant. Furthermore we would have failed those whom the Bible calls "the little ones."

Today marks the 22nd annual Good Friday Service. The first Service, held in 1985, processing to the walls of Durban's Central Prison, was to pray for the treason trialists imprisoned there. Subsequent Good Friday Services were held to pray for the end of apartheid and for those suffering under the repression which accompanied it. But when you look back you will see that these Services did not stop with prayer. No, prayer often gave way to protest, which took many forms such as speaking out against injustices, standing in public places with placards, etc., challenging those in authority - often at great personal cost to the individuals who chose to get involved in these activities. There was in all those things a real determination to act with a view to transforming the unjust system.

Of course things have changed. We have a new political order in place. Many lives have changed for the better. Government is no longer our enemy. But, as you know, we are still faced with enormous social problems. We have been focusing on poverty this morning. There is also HIV/AIDS, crime, the abuse of women and children, teenage pregnancy, corruption – the list is depressingly long.

The Cross of Christ is not simply a symbol of pain and suffering, It is also a sign of God's supreme and unconditional love for us. To embrace the One who gave his life on the Cross, is to experience new life, and the hope and victory of the resurrection.

Let us then step out in faith and give ourselves fully to work for the eradication of poverty, knowing that through the Cross of Christ we will overcome.

Bishop Rubin Phillip
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