

Sermon preached by Bishop Michael Nuttall at the Archbishop's Farewell Service

Sermon at the Farewell Eucharist for Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, St George's Cathedral, Cape Town, 23.09.2007

How unexpected it is for me to find myself standing in this hallowed pulpit today. The plain truth is that Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu was supposed to have been the preacher – and another con-celebrant, and to his great regret a long-standing commitment in the United States has prevented him from being here. So it is that I find myself in the role of “number two to Tutu” all over again, even in retirement. Not for the first time the champagne will have to be substituted by the liqui fruit. Of course, the honour is huge and I do not underestimate it for one moment.

Then there is the extraordinary coincidence whereby the gospel reading set for the very day on which our retiring archbishop has his Farewell Eucharist is – listen for it – the parable of the unjust steward. When I drew Archbishop's Njongo's attention to this fact, he simply roared with laughter. I shall pick up the parable's primary theme, which is prudence, and take my sermon texts from the other two readings instead.

Hosea 11, verse 1. “When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”

And 1 Timothy 2, verse 7. “For this (i.e. this good news) I was appointed a preacher and apostle...”

When our retiring archbishop stood in this very pulpit in September 1996 to deliver his installation sermon, he spoke movingly of his call to ordination while he was a young political prisoner in the 1960s on Robben Island. “Jesus touched me,” he said. It was as simple and as profound as that. There he was, wrestling with God in the dark terror of that island prison, like Jacob at the river Jabbok. He would gaze at the majestic Table Mountain across the intervening sea and wonder how a God capable of creating such natural beauty could allow this suffering to happen to those craving for justice in the land of their birth. Thus the oppressed Israelites would look longingly from Egypt to the promised land where their great forebears, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had lived.

Then, right there in that painful situation (the Archbishop tells us), “Jesus touched me”. In that ‘touching’ he identified himself with the young man's pain. Will your wonders be made known in the dark, asks the writer of Psalm 88 in despondency and desperation. Sometimes that is precisely where they are made known: in the darkest places of our human experience. The portrait of the Archbishop, recently painted by Ronald Harrison, sets forth some of this mystery of our faith, and the prophet Hosea captures it too when he has God saying: “When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt – the very place of trial and tribulation – I called my son.”

Behind the personal experience on Robben Island there lay a significant ancestry of Anglican priesthood. A father, a grandfather and two uncles of the young political prisoner were all priests. A great grandfather might have been in the long line also if some missionary hadn't made the demand that he must sell everything he possessed, to which the great grandfather had replied: “Your God must be wrong, for I have a family to support.” So we do not underestimate the genetic factor in the mysterious outworking of vocation. Yet the personal element is clearly vital, and Njongonkulu – the one of ‘great purpose’ – would carry this element with him right through to the present time. He who had gazed at Table Mountain from across the sea would one day live in its shadow at Bishops court.

Ordination did indeed come, followed by the essential groundwork of a parish ministry. Then one of his predecessors, Philip Russell, brought him into his first experience of a wider ministry where his considerable administrative and theological gifts would flourish. He became Provincial Liaison Officer, based in Johannesburg, and then Principal of St Bede's Theological College in Mthatha. From there his immediate predecessor as archbishop, Desmond Tutu, appointed him as Provincial Executive Officer, which gave him huge responsibility and his first

introduction to the hectic yet spiritually rich environment of Bishops court. Soon he was ready for the episcopate and in 1991 he became bishop of that geographically huge diocese known affectionately as K and K (Kimberley and Kuruman, which Justus Marcus of beloved memory, when he was Dean there, insisted on calling Kimberley and Kuruperson!). Finally, on a historic day in June 1996, Njongonkulu was elected to be Archbishop of Cape Town and Metropolitan of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa. To borrow the words from our reading in 1 Timothy, it can be said: "For this – all of it – I was appointed a preacher and apostle." We are reflecting today on the strange mystery and profound reality of the working out of a vocation whose origins lay in those three words: "Jesus touched me". 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Now, the ministry as Archbishop is to be laid down after eleven years of unrelenting service, and next week a successor is to be elected. We are at another crossroads in the life of our church, praying that God in his mercy will once again be faithful and kind towards us. Fortunately, the next archbishop will inherit a smaller diocese than that over which his predecessors have had to preside. Our present Archbishop's finest hour, perhaps, has been the successful division of the diocese of Cape Town into three, something that not even Desmond Tutu, with all his persuasive powers, was able to accomplish. The new environment of political freedom in our country has surely helped. No longer could division or multiplication look suspiciously like an ecclesiastical version of territorial apartheid with its so-called group areas. Archbishop Njongonkulu has followed in the footsteps of the first Bishop of Cape Town, Robert Gray, who within a very few years after his arrival and after it had taken him no less than nine months to get from Cape Town to Pietermaritzburg and back in a Cape cart, created the first division into Cape Town, Grahamstown and Natal. St Helena followed soon after. And so the pattern has continued in order to facilitate more effective ministry and mission, until now we have 26 dioceses in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. The 160th anniversary of the arrival of Robert and Sophy Gray will be celebrated next year.

Of course, the Archbishop's ministry has not been confined to Cape Town or even to the CPSA as such. He has been involved in a myriad of important causes, nationally and internationally, seeking to combat poverty and international debt, HIV/AIDS and crime. He has worked hard to promote the Millennium Development Goals. He will continue to be involved with "African Monitor" across this continent and with an initiative, in association with government, to restore and revive historic schools such as his own 'alma mater' of Lovedale. The man with a great purpose will not be lying down and doing nothing.

So what about retirement? Joyce Rupp has written an interesting little book called "Praying Our Goodbyes". It addresses the theme, often repeated in our lives, of departure, loss or bereavement, and she speaks of two types of spirituality that can arise. First, a spirituality of emptiness, and secondly, a spirituality of new possibility. Prepare yourself, dear Archbishop, for each of these, because both, in my experience, are true. One of the blessings you may find, as you let go of so much responsibility, is a new freedom to be yourself as a priest rather than as a bishop on a pedestal, as a Christian and, perhaps above all, as a human being beloved of God for who you really are. We remember the inspiring and theologically sound words of the African, Augustine of Hippo, when he entered upon his life as a bishop in the late 4th century. He said to those in his care: "For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian." There is a strange and sometimes insidious imprisonment in the power games that can invade, affect and even begin to control our episcopal ministry. Sometimes I observe the church with what Alan Paton once called "old and knowledgeable eyes", and I long to see a greater modesty in attitude and style within the church's leadership. Imagine if that were a key element at the Lambeth Conference in 2008, what a difference it would make.

Our retiring archbishop has exercised his ministry with a particular degree and a growing quality of modesty and gentleness, as is revealed in his words in today's "Sunday Argus" where he is asked "How do you want to be remembered?", and after hesitating to reply at all, he says: "With all my weaknesses and failures I'd want to be remembered as someone who tried to express the compassion of Christ, who tried to be his eyes, mouth and heart in the world, and who said 'This is the way, walk in it'." Beautiful words: words of modesty and

grace, the long-term fruit of that initial reality when, as a searching young man, he said: "Jesus touched me".

My dear Archbishop, our dear Archbishop, it is good to find a new freedom and a new relaxation in retirement mode, even if, as it will be in your case, one's life remains attractively busy in various ways. Amidst the inevitable element of emptiness, may it be for you and your family a time also of new possibility.

Archbishop Michael Ramsey, that superb example of episcopal ministry at its best, used to say: "I am a priest who happens to be a bishop." And near the end of his life, living in retirement in Oxford, he and a young Muslim from Bangladesh befriended each other. Ramsey used to post his letters and buy his stamps at the corner Post Office where the young Bangladeshi immigrant worked. One day the young man asked Ramsey how long he had been a priest. "Nearly sixty years," the bishop replied. "That is a very long friendship," the young man said in response. Ramsey loved these words. "Yes, yes, yes," he said, "a very long friendship, a very long friendship."

Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift, and to his holy name be all the glory and the praise, now and for ever. Amen.

+Michael Nuttall

(Retired Bishop of Natal and former Dean
of the Province)

Posted: 10/1/2007 (2:48:24 PM)
» [Send to a friend](#)