

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
To the People of God – To the *Laos*
April 2009

Dear People of God

I am writing this in Holy Week, knowing that it will almost certainly reach most of you after Easter Sunday. This underlines to me the constant presence with us of both death and life, of both sorrow and hope.

Rarely a week passes in Bishops court without our receiving news of the death or serious illness of a member of the clergy or their immediate family, whom we then remember in Bishops court Chapel in our daily services of Morning and Evening Prayer and the Eucharist. Recently we mourned the death of Sarah Breytenbach, wife of Bishop Martin of the Diocese of Christ the King – to whom and to whose family we extend our condolences. I was privileged to participate in Sarah's funeral, where we not only grieved her passing, but gave thanks for her life – a life she lived 'with abundance' even through the years of her cancer, in which she had a remarkable ministry to so many people.

Our faith dares us to celebrate life in the face of death – as confidently as Sarah did, and as we did after her death. Yes, we shall all die, and all those we love must also die – and death brings pain and loss and grief that tears our heart, and we must never underestimate this sadness. But death is never the last word. It is never the end of the story. For we are Easter people.

St Paul puts it this way in his first letter to the Corinthians 'If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins; then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died ... for as in Adam all die, so all will be made alive in Christ' (1 Cor 15:17-22).

Alleluia! Christ is Risen Indeed!

This is why, even in Holy Week, we do not stand at the foot of the cross in the same way that the disciples did. We cannot pretend that we do not know that Good Friday is followed by Easter Sunday. But this should not lessen our awe and wonder. For the disciples did not yet understand why Jesus had to die, or how it was that in death he conquered death and destroyed the power of sin. We have that knowledge – and so we watch and wait, not with the sort of dread and despair that filled them, but in the hope of being more deeply drawn into the mystery of his passion, death and resurrection.

And therefore we ponder well-known words of Scripture, asking that as we accept them in our minds, and hold them in our hearts, we may also come to grasp them more and more fully in our souls, our spirits, our inmost beings, even though they are beyond the total comprehension of finite, fallible human beings.

So with awe and wonder we reflect on how the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14), and, emptying himself and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:7,8). As the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn

1:29), he shows the greatest love of all, laying down his life for his friends (Jn 15:13); and though he wrestled in prayer asking that if possible, that cup might pass him by, more than this, he committed himself to the will of God the Father (Mk 14:36), for he knew, as he had already told his followers, that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45).

Therefore we recall how he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness – and reflect how it therefore is that by his wounds we have been healed (1 Pet 2:24). He was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification (Rom 4:25).

And for ourselves, we take time again in Holy Week and Easter to remind ourselves that we have been buried with him by baptism in death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4) – for if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you (Rom 8:11).

Therefore, with confidence we know that Christ Jesus who died and was raised and who is at the right hand of God, indeed intercedes for us (Rom 8:34). This is why, whenever we hear of tragedy in some part of our Province, in Zimbabwe, or elsewhere in the world, I urge you most of all to pray. Prayer is no trivial thing, no ‘excuse’ for not doing something more apparently concrete. Of course, where there are opportunities to take practical action, or to give generously, we should do this. But we should always pray – asking that our prayers be joined with those of Jesus, so that those for whom we pray may receive the fullness of God’s blessing in whatever is their greatest need, and may so find that in all things, no matter how terrible, God does indeed work for good, and that nothing, not even death, can separate us from his love (Rom 8:28, 38,39).

Jesus came that we might have life in abundance (Jn 10:10) for this life and the life to come – so in our prayers, our words, our actions, we should always ‘choose life’ (as Moses urged the ancient Hebrew tribes, Deut 30:19). Therefore, those of you who will be voting in elections later this month, perhaps perplexed by the NPA decision, I urge you ‘choose life’ as you consider whom to support. Ask who, not only in words and promises, but in action, will most bring abundant life to all, and especially to those who are in greatest need. As someone once said, as you mark your ballot papers, ‘make your cross count’.

(Having returned only late last night from lecturing in the US on restorative justice, I hope to reflect more next month on what this might mean for S Africa in the light of the NPA ruling and the complexities surrounding it, and of the election outcome. In June I hope to focus on young people.)

God the Father, by whose glory Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, strengthen you to walk with him in his risen life, and the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always.

Yours in the service of Christ,

+Thabo Cape Town