

To the People of God – To the *Laos*

September 2008

Dear People of God

This is my first spring in Cape Town, and, though the weather can change in moments from warm sunshine to chilly downpour, strong winds to complete calm, I am enjoying the tremendous privilege of living in Bishopscourt, where there is almost immeasurable beauty and diversity, in plant and animal and insect life, in and beyond our grounds.

This makes me very aware of the miracle of creation, and of its fragility. Just as we groan with the burdens of our humanity – longing to become our best selves, always falling short of what we aspire to – so too creation groans, for it bears the consequences of our skewed humanity, demonstrated in thoughtless waste, neglectful pollution, greedy consumption, economic injustices, and selfish abuse of resources (see Romans 8).

But we have a choice: to be part of the problem or to be part of the solution. God's eternal invitation of generous love calls us to walk the way of promise, of redemption, of fullness of life for humanity and for all of creation.

In adopting the 'Season of Creation' we are affirming that we are choosing the option of flourishing humanity within flourishing creation! I hope that many of you will have the opportunity to use the excellent resource book, either now or at some later point (perhaps Lent – and I acknowledge that there have been problems with distribution). The Provincial Liturgical Committee and Synod of Bishops have approved the material produced by an inter-diocesan task team, which can be used for Sunday services and in discussion groups, around the six themes of: Biodiversity, Land, Water, Climate Change, Need not Greed, and Stewardship.

My prayer is that this may enhance our worship of God, deepen our comprehension of God as creator, and broaden our understanding of what it means to be stewards of creation.

The Anglican commitment 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth' is nothing new. For almost a quarter of a century, this has been part of what the Communion considers its 'Five Marks of Mission'. It was also an important theme at the Lambeth Conference.

Province, Dioceses and Parishes can honour God, and the glorious mystery of his creation, through prioritising environmental responsibility in all spheres of life and witness, for example, insisting that internationally, nationally, at provincial and local government level, we do better: on CO₂ and greenhouse gas emissions, on clean and sustainable energy production and consumption, and in legislation that promotes best practice – and penalises those who abuse our world. We can also ensure our churches are environmentally conscious, and press our places of work to act responsibly.

Let me turn to another aspect of human flourishing that is concerning many of us at present – the ability of our countries to mature in the practices of constitutional democracy. Earlier this week I was reflecting on how our circumstances differ from those of the early church, where St Paul, for example, directs the Thessalonians to 'live quietly and mind your own affairs' (1 Thess 4:11). We do not face a potentially hostile Roman Empire, but enjoy the opportunities and responsibilities that constitutional democracy affords.

Therefore we must uphold and strengthen the space for and role of civil society, including faith communities, ensuring we maximise the scope available to us to be constructive contributors to the shaping and developing of our society. Within the wider political culture that we are attempting to nurture, it must be understood by all that there is a vital function to be performed: that of a critical friend to the other organs of national life – including both government and private sector.

'Critical friend' is an important concept – we are friends, on the side of all those who serve the best interests of our countries and people, and on the side of a strong constitutional democracy as a means of building up the life of our nations. But we must also be critical, in the right sense of the word. For hard truths are often best heard from those who are friends. We must not be shy of telling the truths of our communities, nor the truths of our perspectives and our priorities – which are of necessity, and by definition, different from the perspectives and priorities of those who govern and hold power. Mature democracy understands the place of civil society and such critical friends, just as it understands the place of a loyal opposition – the friendship, the loyalty, provide the constructive context for engaging with one another, through which we can all reach a fuller picture.

So, unlike the Thessalonians, we should be ready to be outspoken, and to take our full and rightful place within public debate and policy making. We must grasp the opportunities we have to address the causes of poverty and the means by which these might be alleviated. We must keep on pressing for best

possible practices, for transparency, openness, consultation, and communication on the part of governments, business, civil society, and all with whom we deal.

We must be unhesitating in reject all forms of corruption, inefficiency or carelessness by those whose responsibility it is to make and deliver effective policies, programmes and services. We must be equally unwavering in condemning any attempts to weaken our constitutions and the just rule of law we now enjoy. This should go without saying, but these are priorities of which it is good to remind ourselves from time to time – especially when, as today, the full and free operation of every organ of society, and the functioning of robust and honest debate, can seem open to question.

Yours in the service of Christ

+Thabo Cape Town