



Diocese of Johannesburg

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE ANGLICAN BISHOP DIOCESE OF JOHANNESBURG



Our Vision is: To Achieve the Practice of the Ministry of All Believers

CHRISTMAS PASTORAL LETTER Vol 5 19 December 2022

Dear Diocesan family,

I wonder if you will agree with me that this year has flown past. As I have spoken to many people in our Diocese and beyond, they speak with bewilderment of how the two years during which we had the Covid epidemic seemed to drag by. In many cases people say those Covid years exhausted them. Coming out of it during this year has resulted in what I would describe as “*discipleship fatigue*”. While the parishes of our Diocese and their people have generally been most generous during this time, they have also reflected the fact that people have been trying to cope in the post-Covid era. Our people are constantly aware of a terrible and unwanted war in Ukraine, consequences of which impact on us in ways of which we only become aware after the fact.

And then there are our politicians. Just this past weekend, we were subjected to the spectacle of the major party in this country beginning its conference in the midst of our Diocese. The behaviour of some of its delegates was shameful. The purposeful entry by the former President, disrupting the speech by the sitting President, was something one could never have been imagined by our beloved Madiba, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. Actions like this by people to whom many look up as examples are simply sickening. The likes of many of our forebears who served on the notorious Robben Island, I know, shake their heads in disbelief and cry out aloud, “When wilt Thou save Thy people, Lord, when?”

Amid all these pressures are the rolling blackouts which hit every one of us. We should understand that the present crisis at Eskom, epitomised by the coerced resignation of its latest chief executive, is no joke. What Eskom, in all its failure exemplified by darkness shows us, is that we are reaping the fruits of ill gain – ill begotten fruits harvested among others by many of our leading politicians sitting in the highest places in the land. It is shameful and it is time to say so because our people are suffering.

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Our country is living through an age not experienced since before 1994 of massive economic uncertainty, political upheaval and social challenges. We are confronted daily with the strident cries of politicians and others bemoaning the scandal of Phala Phala. But it is not just this latest scandal that brings us as a people to this grim state of affairs in our country. We all know that the rot started to set in more than ten years ago.

It is against this backdrop that we approach the celebration of the birth of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ our Saviour. Is it not ironic that we shall be singing hymns of praise that speak of the Prince of Peace in a country in which we have come to a place of questionable socio-political stability? For those without homes, waiting forlornly for promises of government to be fulfilled; for those for whom there is no room in the inn because they are part of the massive corps of the unemployed; and for the poor and hungry, the notion of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu's rainbow nation is ridiculous. It is a sad state of affairs.

Christmas gives an opportunity for us all to recommit ourselves to live in peace, harmony and joy. For the Church, it means that we need to emerge from our slumber of discipleship fatigue and get to action, beginning now, no less because Advent is the start of our year as Christians.

My message to you therefore this Christmas is a call to action to make our parishes totally relevant to their membership and communities. We need to settle into the space, as it were, of intentional discipleship. Dealing with the needs of communities is critical but so will be speaking truth to power wherever we find ourselves. We must remember that the first Christmas occurred at a time of great upheaval in the land of Jesus' birth. It is not for nothing that in the Gospel of St Luke we are told of the words of the heavenly host to the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to those on whom God's favour rests." These are the words of our ancestors speaking to us today!

The Scripture narrative is also clear about the viciousness and hatred of humankind, including their leaders, for their fellow human beings. We are told in the Gospel of St Matthew that Joseph was warned to take Jesus to Egypt to escape the fury of Herod who, in his anger at being tricked by the Wise Men, ordered all the children in the region of two years or younger to be killed (Matthew 2: 13-16).

From the times of our foundation, Christians have been challenged by the holy injunction to live peacefully and work for peace, while at the same time confronting the evil of humankind espoused by politicians and rulers like Herod. In your parishes, as you reflect on these final days of Advent, celebrate the birth of Jesus our Lord, and move towards

Epiphany, your challenge is to embrace these two contradictory forces at work as we exercise our discipleship. I pray that you will find the deep faith to do so.

I have many thanks to give as we near the end of the calendar year, but in particular I pay tribute to the hard work of members of Chapter, Siviwe Dongwana, Revd Lynda Shimmin and the administrative team of our Diocese. Their dedication is a source of constant inspiration to me. With sadness but gratitude for their service, we say farewell to Revds Moses and Alison Thabethe. Moses is to become the Dean of Pretoria, while Alison will take up a post as Chaplain of St Mary's Diocesan School for Girls, Pretoria. Revd Collette Saldanha is joining her husband, Wayne, in Mpumalanga and we wish her a blessed future.

I end with two verses of a poem by Revd Dr Wes Jamison of the United Church of Christ in the USA:

"How beautiful upon the roads
Are the hands of those who embody peace,
Who touch with tenderness the wounds of old,
And dress them with the healing waters of their tears.

"How beautiful upon the face of eternity
Is the God who comes to us,
Who dares to take on flesh and blood,
And live and die as one of us."

Liziwe and I send you sacred greetings at this Christmastime as you pray about the challenges that lie ahead. May the Prince of Peace be your Star in the East, ever faithful, ever loving, ever hopeful.



+ Steve

Bishop of Johannesburg

Steve