

Archbishop's Holy Week News & Reflections –

6 April 2020

Dear Parishioners, Clergy and Bishops

At noon today 21 Bishops of the Province began Holy Week by sharing in a Litany for the Coronavirus Pandemic on a video conference call. It was, as a number of Bishops said afterwards, a very special gathering, a precious and touching moment of being united in prayer amidst crisis and uncertainty, as well as an invitation to deep theological reflection on the time we are living through.

I had earlier appealed to Bishops in the Southern African Anglican Theological Commission to lead the way in developing a theology of COVID-19, asking them to contemplate the nature of humanity and its responsibility in the wake of the virus. How are we, I asked them, to understand the nature of God in such a time as this? In consultation with theologians in all our Dioceses, and engaging the College of the Transfiguration, let us use our learnings from this period.

Ahead of Easter, having given permission in my Diocese for clergy to celebrate the Eucharist on their own, I am encouraging clergy who can do so to celebrate the Eucharist online on Sunday, or in clips pre-recorded for use that day, in order that parishioners can make their Communion at this most important celebration of our year.

These steps are, of course a break from our tradition, but in the way we normally celebrate the Eucharist, it is a missiological and biblical imperative not only for those present, but also those not present – those who live in Christ beyond time and space.

In the past few days, I have been in direct communication with South Africa's President, in which I prayed for him as he faces the enormous responsibility of being the first president in our history to face both a pandemic and a major external economic blow at the same time. I assured him of our Church's love, admiration for him and his leadership, and he has graciously replied with a note of thanks for a “most uplifting message.”

The mass screening and testing programme which the South African Government is now beginning to roll out is absolutely crucial – unless we screen people for the coronavirus, refer those with possible symptoms for testing, then trace others who may have been in their presence, we will not know the full extent of the crisis we face. Right now, we just don't know the true numbers of people infected.

Please be ready to help with this programme if needed, by urging our people to cooperate and if asked, for example, to make church premises available for mobile clinics. Please also watch for signs of those testing positive facing stigma in our communities and give pastoral support as best you can to those who go into isolation.

We send our prayers and good wishes to President Ramaphosa, Minister of Finance Tito Mboweni, Minister Zweli Mkhize and Kings Letsie, Leruo and Zwelithini, and the Anglicans who serve in essential government service, including those who serve in the SA Police Service and the SANDF, especially our parishioner General Shoke – as well as Zwelinzima Vavi in hospital.

On other pastoral issues arising from the virus, with people confined to their homes, we must also be on the lookout for indications of domestic abuse in households in our communities. Globally, the United

Nations chief, [António Guterres, says](#) there is a “horrrifying global surge in domestic violence” since lockdowns began, and we are unlikely to be immune from that.

While much of the economy is brought to a halt, many families will inevitably face food shortages. Our own COVID-19 teams are addressing this among a number of other issues, and I have also endorsed [a call by the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation](#) for a national food security campaign. This aims to mobilise people at the grassroots level to establish Local Food Committees to receive and distribute food, or money for food, and where needed to support government, particularly at provincial and local levels, to provide food in communities.

And in the Western Cape, I am being approached about how the inter-faith community can help the medical authorities with telephone counselling to patients in hospital in isolation, families who cannot visit their loved ones, and perhaps counselling medical staff who are scared and at risk themselves.

A disturbing development from Durban, reported by Bishop Rubin Phillip, is that the eThekweni municipal authorities have begun – in the midst of the lockdown – to [forcibly remove the shack-dwellers](#) with whom he has been working for the past 17 years. He appeals for our prayers for them – these removals come after many years of harassment of the Abahlali BaseMjondolo movement which represents the dwellers.

Now to encouraging news from Mozambique: Bishop Carlos Matsinhe of Lebombo writes from Maputo that at the invitation of the Government, he celebrated the Palm Sunday Eucharist and the Blessing of Psalms on a live national television broadcast. He will again hold live nationwide televised services on Good Friday and Easter. On a more worrying note, he reports that the country is battling to implement emergency regulations designed to stop the spread of the virus.

To end with, a Palm Sunday homily that spoke to me, delivered online by the Revd Fred Hendricks, a pastor, teacher and spiritual enabler in the Diocese of Saldanha Bay. It begins 2min 12sec into his Palm Sunday service on the track below.

God bless

††Thabo