

Feast of the Presentation February 2nd 2007: Kaduna, Nigeria

Meditation by the Right Reverend Dr Michael Jackson, bishop of Clogher and chairperson of NIFCON Management Group at the start of the NIFCON Consultation on: Faith and Citizenship.

St Luke 2:27,28: Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God.

It is surely no wonder that, as Children of God and People of the Book, we are often drawn to the number forty. In the Old Testament we remember the wilderness wanderings of the Children of Israel for all of forty years. In our own spiritual life, we are soon to enter the forty days of Lent when we offer penitence and self-denial to God as our preparation for Good Friday and Easter Day. The Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple marks another forty days since Christmas Day, the day on which we met the Christ-child in the stable at Bethlehem and travelled with the shepherds to worship the infant of Mary.

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple marks forty days beyond Christmas Day. The oldest reference to this feast names it not The Presentation, nor The Purification, nor even Candlemas – all names with which we are familiar - but simply: The Meeting (upapante). This name comes from the verses from St Luke which I quoted above, when Simeon and Jesus meet one another in the Temple. There Simeon's joyful response to the Christ is to trumpet the generosity of a God who in offering a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel sweeps us up into this charter of salvation.

We are here in Kaduna, as members of the Anglican Communion from right across the world, at the invitation of Archbishop Josiah, one of the Presidents of NIFCON, the Network for Inter-Faith Concerns of the Anglican Communion - with you for whom this place is a spiritual home. Each one of us brings to you greetings in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ from the people of our own province, diocese and parish. We meet as fellow-members of the Anglican Communion, worshipping God under the banner of Holy Scripture which displays to the world of God's creation our confident conviction: The truth shall set you free! We meet to share our experience of life and our exploration of the Scriptures with Nigerian and African Christians. We meet to learn of your experience of living alongside people of faiths other than Christianity. For you this is part of the patchwork, the colourful weaving, of human meeting on a daily basis. It is an enriching experience for us to be taken by you all into your hearts and homes and to listen to you about the challenges and the hopes of peaceful co-existence and fruitful encounter in this country and to applaud the honesty and integrity of your walk with God.

Such experiences and such meetings are different wherever and whenever they happen. But there is a common thread of humanity in such meeting and encounter. Respect can flourish where ignorance and suspicion give way in the face of knowledge and understanding. The truth which sets us free releases and empowers us to be Children of God in our encounter with everyone we meet. The truth of God gives us a confidence of voice and a generosity of heart to see the face of Jesus Christ in our neighbour. Meeting others provides opportunities for the presentation of the love of God which casts out fear.

The meeting of the aged Simeon and the infant Jesus gives us food for thought as we embark on this most exciting Consultation. A number of things will guide our work and help to set our priorities. The old and the young meet and give voice to that encounter in praise of God. For Simeon, the waiting had all been worth it. In his moment of greatest joy, he can now ask God to let him end his faithful vigil. The same Simeon has a word of harsh reality for Mary the young mother of Jesus: This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too. The shaft of conflict casts its shadow deep into this meeting of three generations. And let us not forget Anna, daughter of Phanuel, a powerful witness to the patient continuance in well-doing of widows in the life of faithful service. A country such as Nigeria, with warfare in its history, has many widows who, like Anna, know what it is to experience the deepest loss at the height of their happiness. With an intuition born of prayer, Anna points to the child in their midst as the fulfilment of the hope of redemption. The meeting of people of every generation; the sword of conflict; the tragedy of loss – all of these are contemporary realities of Inter-Faith encounter which we cannot ever forget.

It is good that we are in an African country to open up a discussion of citizenship. I say this because you have much to teach us from your own history with which our history is bound. I say this also because it is to Augustine

of Hippo, African Christian and bishop, that the world owes the first sustained exploration of what it is to be a citizen of heaven on earth in his work City of God.

Citizenship above and citizenship below poses a question which is our question every time we say the Lord's Prayer. It is our constant challenge to serve God in serving our neighbour. It is our constant opportunity to embrace our every neighbour in the name of Jesus Christ and in the love of the Holy Spirit every time we meet.

February 7th 2007: St Michael's Cathedral Kaduna, Nigeria

Sermon by the Right Reverend Dr Michael Jackson, bishop of Clogher and chairperson of NIFCON Management Group at the end of the NIFCON Consultation on: Faith and Citizenship.

St John 1:46: Nathanael exclaimed: Can anything good come from Nazareth? Philip said: Come and see!

It seems to me that the Gospel (St John 1.35-end) is helpful as we draw this NIFCON Consultation to a close this afternoon with a celebration of Holy Communion here in St Michael's cathedral, the mother church of Kaduna Diocese. Having come to know one another well over the past six days, we now make ready to return to the places we know best, our homes, our families, our churches and our work. But after everything we have done, all we have heard and said, I suspect that we do sense that we are at a point of transition, a point of movement, from one state of being to another. Things will already be different when we get back and we will be different.

Such a sense of transition is captured early in this Gospel. As St John expresses it, the movement from being a disciple of John the Baptizer to being a disciple of Jesus the Lamb of God is one which John seems to encourage. And when John's two disciples catch up with Jesus, his response is one of open invitation:

Come and see!

and as chapter 1 of St John's Gospel continues, the invitations:

Come and see!

and

Follow me!

seem to be interchangeable.

A number of other things comes to the fore as essential to those who choose the discipleship of the Messiah:

- the connection is clearly made with fulfilment of what Moses and the prophets said.
- the connection is also made with Jesus, son of Joseph of Nazareth. The law, the prophets and the human person come together in the one person.
- one particular follower, Nathanael, God's gift, makes the connection with the Son of God and the King of Israel.

Subtly and increasingly the existing tradition finds a fulfilment in the fresh expression of who God is. It is not so much that God changes into something or someone new. It is rather a fresh expression of who God always is.

This is an open-ended experience because the invitations: Come and see! and Follow me! lead into a new future. This Gospel has only begun, and Jesus has only really begun to give expression to his Father, to himself and to his Spirit.

We have been invited to Kaduna to: Come and see. We have done that: seen new people, new situations, old situations in a new light. We have met a whole range of new possibilities along with old possibilities which we will need to revisit. Our second invitation is to: Follow Jesus Christ with all of what we have seen when we came.

As we are sent out once again into God's world and our world to love and to serve, we must ourselves follow both of these invitations and in a spirit of gracious discipleship bring them into our new life of what I can only call Inter-Faith Christianity. Much of it may be unspectacular. It will be none the worse for that. Much of it will be frustrating. God will give us strength, courage and compassion. Much of it will be surprising. God has opened our eyes to that.

Kaduna has been the right place to start again to do all of this. We have been able to meet and to listen to people from Kaduna, people on the ground, lay and ordained, about the dangers and the possibilities of the Inter-Faith dialogue of life. We have been able to witness to the ways in which Christian and Muslim leaders bear witness to that great Anglican call to integrity and activity: 'The truth shall set you free.' We have been in Kaduna at a very poignant and painful moment, the seventh Anniversary of the Kaduna Riots of which the death toll has never yet fully been counted.

In this Eucharist, this Thanksgiving for Cross and Resurrection, we remember those who died in that dreadful time here in Kaduna; we remember the building of new bridges; we remember the work of social transformation which still has to come in so many areas of life needing transformation. To us, as to fellow-Christians world-wide, the same Jesus Christ who says: Come and see! says in this Eucharist: Come, eat and drink!

This invitation goes in God's name beyond us to all those beyond the church whom God already meets. To peter in Acts 10 the voice came a second time: It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean. (Acts 10.15)