

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Most Reverend Desmond M. Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of South Africa
75th Anniversary Celebration, Evensong, May 11, 2006

ONE FAMILY, TOGETHER

In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well what a glorious, glorious occasion. Good evening.

(The congregation replies "good evening.")

I suspect that most would agree that that was a lousy response, really. Good evening.

(The congregation replies "good evening.")

Aw, slightly better.

I bring you greetings from your sisters and brothers in South Africa. We still say the "new South Africa," even though now it is 12 years since our first democratic elections, but for us it is still an incredible novelty, and we keep having to pinch ourselves to realize that we aren't dreaming, and we know that it all happened because we have such fantastic friends like yourselves who were fantastic in supporting us in our struggle against apartheid.

And so I bring you greetings from those of your sisters and brothers out there, and I also have the great privilege of being able to say thank you, thank you, thank you for that support that you gave us. Now of course it would look odd if I clapped for you all by myself, so I -- I actually discovered that I had a wonderful magic wand. When I wave it over people, it turns them into instant South Africans.

So I wave my magic wand and I say, "Fellow South Africans, how about giving these Americans a real humdinger, eh?"

(The congregation applauds)

Thank you.

A few years ago I was with a number of Australians -- Australian students in Australia and I said, "The trouble with most of us is that, you know, we don't celebrate who we are," and I said, "How about giving yourselves a warm hand?" -- and they really took the roof off. And then I said, "How about giving God a standing ovation?" And they all rose and cheered as if their life depended on it, and without thinking I said, "Thank you."

A student of mine -- I was teaching for a little while at Emory University -- sent me a photograph. I don't know what message she was seeking to send to me, but this was a photograph of a big notice board outside a church, and it said, "Have difficulty sleeping? Let the church help. Try our sermons."

Well, I hope you won't be feeling too much like that, but it is a glorious, glorious occasion: Saint Mark's celebrates being 75 years young. I am so deeply thankful for the wonderful coincidence that I too later this year will be turning 75. It is such a joyous privilege to share in your splendor, your quite outstanding -- really, I should say, *spectacular* celebration in this service. Really, actually, I think the girls' choir, and those people sitting over there have really regaled us and helped us know that Heaven is a great place to be, so how about a clap for them? A clap for them, yes?

(The congregation applauds the girls' choir)

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you dear bishops of the diocese for your permission to let me hold forth here. You are generous. And I noticed that sort of one or two people seem to like the dean. We think we like you, Mr. Dean.

(The congregation applauds Dean Taylor)

That's lovely. Yes, that's beautiful. Thank you very much.

Now one of the things you discover as you grow older, and some people say to you, "Don't say you *grow older*," they say, "It is just that you have been younger a little longer." Well one is, of course, that you are repetitive. Certainly I have been that quite a bit, but the other is being struck by something that had been sticking out like sore thumb all of these years. Suddenly the penny drops and you see a new truth -- certainly new for you -- amazing -- amazing how something that really was staring you in the eyes all these many, many years that have gone past, and you will realize what I have talked about just now.

It had never struck me until fairly recently just how significant, in fact how radical our Lord's words that he exchanged with Mary Magdalene in the garden on the first Easter morning. It is words that I have heard, as I think you have heard, times without number, but only very, very recently have I awakened to the extraordinary explosiveness of those words. Just listen to them.

Mary has talked to the angels, and then she turns around and sees this one she thinks is the gardener. Jesus asked her, "Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" Thinking it was the gardener she said, "If it was you, sir, who removed him, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away." And Jesus said, "Mary," and she turned and said to him, "Rabboni," which is Hebrew for teacher. "Do not cling to me," said Jesus, "for I have not yet ascended to the Father, but go" -- listen -- "but go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my father and your father; to my God and your God.

Jesus refers to the group of men who were his followers, one of whom betrayed him while another denied him not once but three times, despite being forewarned, and they all left him in the lurch. They all forsook him when he was arrested.

Now I know just what choice words with suitable epithets I would have used to describe the old so-and-sos. Jesus -- note: Jesus doesn't call them "my disciples," which would have

been an incredibly magnanimous way of addressing this lot, considering their despicable behavior. He does not even call them "friends," because you remember he told them a little earlier, "I no longer call you servants, I call you friends," as if it were a high title. He doesn't call them disciples, he doesn't call them friends, he calls them "*my brothers*," and I think the moment is too solemn for Jesus to have spoken only glibly, lightly, not meaning it. And you hear it. I think he's quite serious because he says to Mary Magdalene, "Don't touch me. Don't let it to be as if nothing has changed."

In the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and John -- and Luke, sorry -- Matthew, Mark and Luke, the so-called "Synoptic Gospels," you will recall that somewhere Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, and there he invites them to use -- speaking to God, to use this intimate term, which is really how little children would address their father. Jesus is saying, "Hey, you guys, when you address this one, you can actually say Daddy God. Daddy God. Pops. Pops God."

I think we have gotten so used to -- we have become blasé that you and I, knowing ourselves as who we are, can actually call the omnipotent one, the all holy one, the creator of all there is, "Hey, Daddy God. Here I am again."

It is the very first time in the fourth Gospel that Jesus refers to this relationship which they share with him. He is saying one of the consequences of his passion, death and resurrection was that they were now numbers of God's family. They were not just colleagues or fellow apostles; no, they were intimately connected as members of one family. They were his brothers and so brothers one of another. And in a way it is one in the eye for us male chauvinists that it is a woman who will bear this extraordinary news to the male disciples, so that a woman is the first apostle, and she is an apostle to the apostles.

You will remember that according to St. Paul, one of the qualifications for being an apostle is to have seen the risen Lord, and no question at all that Mary Magdalene certainly had done that, but that is just an aside.

Now do you remember when Saul was going to Damascus? He is struck by a heavenly light and goes blind and he is led into Damascus, and then

Ananias, who is already a member of the infant Church, gets a vision, and in the vision the Lord says to him, "Ananias," and he says, "Yes, Lord," "I would like you to go to Straight Street, and you are going to find Saul," and Ananias says, "Excuse me? Saul? I mean, Lord, you can't be serious, can you? Do you know this guy? I mean this guy came here specifically to sow mayhem amongst your followers." Ananias has forgotten he is talking to the omniscient one, the one who knows everything. He says, "Do you know this guy?" And the Lord says, "Um-hum. Um-hum. You go, you go, you go."

And so Ananias, who had no inhibitions and any kind of thinking about this Saul, goes to this house. Do you remember his words? The very first words he utters are, "Brother Saul." "Brother Saul" addressed to the arch prosecutor. This is startling. The persecutor has become a member of the family. Jesus, speaking about his coming exultation, as John called it, his passion and death on the cross, Jesus says, "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all -- will draw all to me."

Have you noticed Jesus says, "I will draw all," not, "I will draw some." I will draw -- I will draw all -- all -- all will become insiders. None is an outsider in this family. All. All. Black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, beautiful, not so beautiful, male, female, young, old, gay, lesbian, so-called straight --

(The congregation applauds)

All. All belong. Jew, Palestinian, Buddhist, Muslim, atheist, secularist -- all -- all -- all -- all are held in this incredible embrace, this wide embrace with a love that will not let anyone go -- with a love that is unchanging and unchangeable.

Now you'll say "radical." Well, you know something? God has no enemies. God has no enemies, and certainly my enemies are not God's enemies. Each and all are precious, with a preciousness that cannot be computed. Each is known by name. For every single one of them, "your name is engraved on the palms of my hands," says God, about each and every single one of us.

So what? Well, no one can be excluded. Saddam Hussein. Bin Laden. George Bush. The Iranian president. The North Koreans. All. All belong. Just think of the person you can least stand. Do you know God loves that person as if they were the only person on earth -- just as God loves you?

God looks for a human parallel and God finds that the highest form of human love to which God might begin to compare divine love is mother love, and God says, "Do you know a mother who would ever forget the child she bore?" I mean just tell me, have you ever met a mother pushing a pram and somebody peeks in the pram and says, "Wow, God gave you an ugly baby." And the mother says, "Yes, this year God has given me an ugly baby," but I don't know any mother who would say of her child, no matter how disfigured, "This is an ugly child." There is no mother that I know who would even admit. "Hey, this is a kook" -- no, the mother would say, "They say -- they say he is a kook," and God says -- God says, "This inconceivable thing might just happen, that a mother might forget the child she bore, but I won't. I won't forget you. I won't forget you, you are so precious, and I hold you -- I hold you like a mother dangling a precious only child against her breast," and God does that -- God does that. Do you know God does that for everyone? God does that for *every single one*.

And in a family you don't say, "You are going to share from the family budget in proportion to your contribution." The baby contributes nothing, really; nothing except sometimes those strange smells, but I mean baby -- I mean baby is flooded with love because, you see, the ethic of family is from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.

Now if you and I truly accepted that we are family, how in the name of everything that is good can we continue to spend what can only be described as obscene amounts on budgets of death and destruction, when we know that just a minute fraction of those budgets would ensure that God's children everywhere, our sisters and brothers, would have enough food to eat, would have clean water to drink, would have a decent home, would have affordable health care, would -- would -- would -- would have a good education? How could we continue in the face

of the needs of members of our family? How?
How do we think we could ever win the so-called "war against terror"? We won't. We can't win that war as long as there are conditions in the world that make God's children -- my sister, my brother -- your sister, your brother -- makes them desperate. How could we ever hope?

Didn't Martin Luther King say something like, "We have to learn to live together as brothers and sisters?" Unless we do, we will perish together as fools. We are meant as those made for family. We are made for togetherness. We are made -- we are made to hold on to one another for we can be human ... only together.

We can be free ... only together.

We can be prosperous ... only together.

We can be safe and secure ... only together.

And God says, "Yes, I have a dream. I have a dream that one day my children will come to realize that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family," and God says, "Please. Please help me. Please help me. Please help me to realize my dream. Please. Please?"