

**Province of Southern Africa  
Diocese of Mthatha**

## **SERMON FOR DIOCESAN FAMILY DAY**

**July 2015**

**The Rt Revd Dr Robert Gillies, Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney**

**Acts 4:5-12**

**1 John 3:16-24**

**John 10:11-18**

*My Lord Bishop, Archdeacons, Canons, fellow clergy and friends: Grace, mercy and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

First of all I owe a great deal of thanks to my brother Lord Bishop, +Sitembele, for his kind generosity in inviting me to offer you this sermon today.

As always he and Mrs Mzamane are warm and kind hosts to myself and my wife here on our visit to you from your companion diocese, the Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney.

My Lord Bishop here once spoke of the two of us as being twins and he said that I am a whitey and he is a blackey. 'That makes us twins'. It was a wonderful thing that he said and it is one of the most kind-hearted things anyone has ever said to me. And I treasure those words.

*It is my joy and delight to bring you the greetings of my home church, the Scottish Episcopal Church, and in particular the Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney. The association between Scotland and South Africa's Eastern Cape goes back almost 150 years and we are blessed because of it.*

*My own is the most northern of all the Dioceses in Great Britain and extends from the city of Aberdeen to the tip of the most remote of Britain's islands.*

*In my diocese we have forty two churches and about six private chapels. We have a rich Christian heritage which, so very sadly, is under huge pressure as secular humanism and militant atheism place us under attack.*

*In addition paganism and various forms of non-Christian spiritualism attract people away from what you and I recognise to be the one true faith given to us by Jesus*

Christ himself and spread by his followers from the moment of his first resurrection appearance down through the ages and right to us today.

I have great pleasure in being with you today for it is your faith, the faith of Africa, that gives us great comfort and great inspiration in western Europe. When we see what you can achieve in Africa we get a glimpse of what we could do ourselves. We owe a great debt to you and thank you for your witness and perseverance in the faith and well as your commitment to its spread.

Likewise wherever I have gone archdeacons, clergy and people have, without fail, given us a truly warm and affectionate, a truly African welcome.

It is wonderful to be here and I thank you, and indeed thank you all for the wonderful hospitality you so freely share.

In many ways this atmosphere of kindness, this sense of goodness and thoughtfulness is there in two of today's readings.

It is there in the reading from the First Letter of John and it is there in John's Gospel. Namely, 'Care for the other person'.

None of this need surprise us for there is much in the Old Testament that says very much the same sort of thing.

And also in non-Biblical material from around the time of Jesus two thousand years ago, and earlier, the same theme of kindness towards the other person is present.

For example, a writer from ancient times, told a story of Moses. This particular story isn't in the Bible but it tells us something about Moses and the sort of person that he was.

The story is told that a young goat had run away from the flock. Moses went off in search of it, followed its tracks, and found it drinking at a water-hole.

He waited patiently till it had finished drinking and had had a rest. Then he picked it up with great tenderness, put it across his shoulders and then carried it back to the flock to be back with its family.

And the story continues by saying the God is pleased with what Moses has done and he says this to Moses, "How great are your tender mercies. You took pity on the young goat because you are full of mercy. Therefore you shall lead my people, Israel, and be their shepherd."

These are indeed powerful words for all of us to hear.

What came to me as I was preparing this sermon for you was the thought, not just from this story, but also from the Biblical one as well, that mercy and kindness were qualities that set Moses apart as someone who should be a leader.

It wasn't that Moses set up a policy and worked his way into a position of leadership.

It wasn't that Moses had ambition and drive to go on and advance his career.

It wasn't that Moses even wanted to be a leader.

But it was that in his heart, *care and concern* for the other dominated and directed his actions.

*Mercy and tenderness* led to God placing his trust in Moses to be the leader that God needed.

Moses' personality ensured that when someone, or something, was suffering or at risk or vulnerable, whether from attack, or whether – like this goat – it had wandered away everything that Moses was sent him to rescue it.

Care and concern, self-giving and thoughtful consideration were the operating motivation that led him to do what he knew he needed to do in order to be faithful *both* to the will of God and also to be faithful to the needs of God's people and, by attending to the needs of animals, to be faithful to the needs of God's wider kingdom.

I recall the story of a former Prime Minister of India, Mahatma Gandhi who did something similar and behaved in a similar way.

The story is that when he was in the heat of some crisis or other in India he wanted to help a child whose animal (and from memory I think it was a chicken) had just broken its leg.

'Let the affairs of state just wait a minute whilst I look after this poor injured one' might have been what he said. It was certainly there in his mind.

This is the motivation of mercy and kindness which I long to see in the hearts and souls not just of those who seek to lead us, or those who actually are leaders but I long to see it in the heart and soul of every Christian believer. You, me, everybody.

And yet all too often these simple qualities of tenderness, mercy, kindness and generous thoughtfulness are absent from Christian lives.

Thinking now of the Gospel passage there is a reference to a 'hired servant' a 'hired hand' who has been brought in from outside to look after the flocks and herds that Jesus is describing here.

The people Jesus is talking about here have no real interest in the flocks that have been put in their care.

All they bother about is their own self-interest; how much money they can get; whether they can take a sheep or a goat for themselves without the Master of the Sheep knowing or noticing; or if they can avoid any risk were a wolf, lion or worse to appear.

Jesus contrast this hired hand with the flock's own shepherd. The true shepherd, and the good shepherd, is indeed interested in the sheep. He knows the sheep. And, equally importantly, the sheep know him.

What I'm saying ought now to be becoming clear. We are called to be shepherds. Bishops definitely. Priests as well. But all of us as Christian believers are similarly called to be shepherds in one form or another.

It might, quite literally, mean looking after a flock of sheep. But with tenderness and kindness it might also mean looking after the needs of someone near to you who needs help and support. And so on.

By becoming shepherds in the way the Jesus calls us to be showing these personal qualities of kindness, tenderness, mercy, gentleness and so on we show ourselves to be true followers of the one true Lord Jesus Christ.

With these qualities of our faith we can leave those who can take care of themselves and we can search for, find and rescue the lost and take them to a place of safety, so to speak.

This is, I fundamentally believe, a supreme human task that arises from our faith in God. By living these qualities we display the love of Jesus to all those around us. And in the power of the Holy Spirit we live these qualities not because we want public recognition, not because we think we are really good, not because we want to advance ourselves, but only because this is what Jesus wants us to do.

And for it all there is no greater reward than to be accepted by Jesus and for us to know that in doing all this we are his hands and eyes, giving, showing and sharing his love in the world today.

Amen.

†Robert Gillies

Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney