

CHOOSE LIFE:

PREPARING FOR 2009 ELECTIONS

DURING LENT

SUNDAY REFLECTIONS
AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES FROM OUR BISHOPS

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Preamble

We are living in one of the most momentous times of this year both as Catholics and as citizens of our beautiful country Malawi. As *Catholics*, from Ash Wednesday (25th February, 2009) we enter a privileged time of 40 days (quadragesima) of intense prayer, fasting and alms giving. This period will usher us into the Holy Week – a special week of commemoration of the Sufferings, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As *citizens* of our beautiful country – Malawi – we will shortly be going to the polls in a General Election on 19 May, 2009 to elect our leaders for the next five years. We are on the threshold of an important juncture in which an extraordinary opportunity to participate in determining the direction of our country is suddenly in our hands again.

What a happy coincidence for us that the period running up to the General Elections runs alongside the liturgical period of Lent and Easter in which we commemorate the great mysteries of our salvation: Sufferings, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Is it perhaps more than a coincidence? The story of humanity cannot be considered purely secular; it is the unfolding story of God's saving presence!

This document is an effort to allow the unfolding story of our country especially at this important juncture be guided by the unfolding story of God's saving presence. It is a document that merges the Word of God in this Lenten period and the teachings of the Bishops into thematic points for prayer, reflection and action as we approach the Elections. It is a document for reflection and prayer emanating from Pastoral letters and the Lenten Sunday Readings. This approach is in line with a longstanding conviction of the Church that "the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, . . . are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well" (*Gaudium et spes* 1).

While this is *not* a Pastoral letter of the Bishops to be read out on a particular Sunday; the idea of using the Pastoral letters in this engaging way in the period leading up to the elections has been endorsed by the bishops. Inspired by the recent Plenary Session of AMECEA in which, among other

things, the Episcopal Conference of Malawi advocated for a more prophetic, vigilant and intrusive Catholic Church in matters of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace, this document has received the full support of the bishops.

Bringing together key guidelines from the 2008 Pastoral Letter "*Taking Responsibility for Our Future: Together Towards the 2009 Elections*" anchored by some preceding pastoral letters that dealt with elections, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace has, through this document, set the Church and indeed all people of good will on the right path towards Easter and towards the General Elections. Specifically, the document has three objectives.

Firstly, it acts as an inspiration to the clergy as they prepare to disseminate God's Word during this period of Lent.

Secondly, it provides critical reflection notes and questions for discussion in such groups as the Small Christian Communities, Justice and Peace Meetings, Youth Groups, Lay movements, and various other Election discussion fora.

Finally and above all, this document is intended to inspire people towards personal reflection, prayer and conversion in this Lenten Season. It remains the conviction of the Church that the social ills of our country will not be overcome solely by political or social remedies because the true nature of the evil facing our society is *sin* and the *structures* produced by sin as it multiplies and spreads. By implication, therefore, this is a pastoral initiative intended at motivating Christians during this period of Lent to think about their positive role and engagement in shaping the future of this nation.

This project would have remained on the level of the wish of the Bishops had it not been for the active participation and support of various people, groups and organizations. Thanks to their efforts and resources, we now have this document in our hands. Now, the stage is set for us as the liturgical period of Lent and Easter runs alongside the period towards the General Elections. It is *not* a coincidence. This is the period in which we are called to testify that the unfolding events in our country cannot be considered purely secular; they are indeed part of the unfolding story of God's saving presence!

Rev. Fr. George Buleya
Secretary General
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INTRODUCTION

UPROOTING EVIL AND PROMOTING CHRISTIAN VALUES

Lent is a period when Christians reflect on the Sufferings, Death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ thus our salvation history. This year's Lenten period starts from Ash Wednesday February 25th, to Saturday, April 11th. It is a period in which we as Christians are challenged to uproot anything that is evil from our hearts, our families, our Churches and our Nation.

Since 2009 is an Election Year here in Malawi, the Lenten will be an opportune time to reflect seriously on the choice of leaders we have to make!

In the 18th Pastoral Letter of our Bishops in preparation for the Elections entitled: *"Taking Responsibility for Our Future: Together Towards the 2009 Elections"* the Bishops, quoting the Scriptures, said, *"Today, I put before you life and death; choose life then"* (Dt 30:15-19). We need God's own wisdom in order to choose what in our circumstances is life. Every Christian, is thus urged to choose wisely on 19 May. Choosing wisely entails choosing what is compatible with God's will. God wants total redemption of humankind which is possible when society rids itself of sin and sinful tendencies. This Lenten season is an opportunity for us to root out evil and establish the values of God's Kingdom.

THY KINGDOM COME

Jesus said *"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Good News"* (Mk1:15). Everyone has a role to play to have the Kingdom of God established here on earth. Let us ensure that God alone is given glory and then peace will descend on earth. Since God has entrusted the earth to His people, we have the duty to participate in the electoral processes this year by choosing:

leaders who are God-fearing and who have His will at heart. We have to acknowledge that God is the creator and source of everything. Choosing leaders that are not attentive to God's will is doing a de-service to ourselves and our nation.

LENTEN OBLIGATIONS

There are three major areas we are asked to pay attention to in Lent:

1. Intensive Prayer Life:

Prayer life should animate all our activities. Jesus teaches us to pray always. To pray is to be in touch with God and to let God direct our daily life. Prayer should be the most important thing in our lives. God is our Father and He is the only one who satisfies our ambitions and desires. What is important is not to be hypocrites in our prayer. Prayer is not about forcing God to do what we want but being in touch with and listening to God. This Lenten period may we intensify our prayer life so that God may enlighten our minds and hearts to choose our leaders wisely.

Fasting:

In this Lent we are urged to deny ourselves certain things like food and drinks in a spirit of suffering with Jesus. This is the time to train ourselves to focus our attention on God alone. Self denial is a virtuous way of training ourselves to fight against evil.

Alms Giving:

During Lent we are challenged to be charitable to the needy and the poor. We deny ourselves of certain food and drinks so that the needy may eat and drink. In the fourth coming elections we should choose leaders who have the welfare of all Malawians especially the poor and the marginalized at heart. We need leaders who can build our nation and who can usher into our country unity, justice, development and peace. We do not want leaders who are greedy and self centered. We should not be lured by leaders who promise easy life without sacrifice and hard work.

PREPARING FOR 2009 ELECTIONS

This election period is a privileged time to reflect on how we have managed the economy, education, governance and development. We have to affirm and empower good leaders and give them a new mandate and replace those that have failed the nation. (See *"Choosing Our Leaders in the Forth-Coming Elections,"* 2003).

On 19 May, we should choose leaders who can develop our country.

In the 1992 Pastoral Letter entitled *"Living our Faith"* the Bishops strongly condemned the social ills and atrocities that were inflicted on the people during the

one party system of Government. As a result of this, we chose a multiparty system of Government and we also reviewed our Constitution.

However, in recent years, we have sadly tolerated bad leadership and tendencies to take root in our midst. This is manifested in the following forms:

- Self enriching leaders
- Mismanagement of Economy
- Mismanagement of Government resources
- Declining standards and quality of education
- Immorality
- The use of abusive language in public
- Irresponsible behavior in Parliament
- Careless privatization of Government companies
- Violence
- Corruption and bribery
- Injustice
- Savagery and murder

This year's vote should be aimed at uprooting evil in our society. Political parties are abundant but what is crucial is to scrutinize their **ideology, values and principles**. In the interest of common good, the Church has a duty to scrutinize leaders of political parties and all contestants. The Pastoral Letters and principles of the Social Teaching of the Church will guide us to choose the right leaders.

QUALITIES OF A GOOD LEADER

When choosing our leaders, let us pay attention to the following qualities:-

1. ACCOUNTABILITY:

“Each one of us shall be requested to give an account of the talents, resources, offices put at our disposal... Those elected by the people should not be “rubber-stamping” decisions of higher authorities, as it were, merely towing the party line but rather consult and represent the views and needs of their constituency and ordinary citizens. We need leaders who are with and for the people, leaders who are genuine representatives of people. Such leaders will therefore listen to the views of their people and so will be able to deliver satisfactorily by fully addressing needs of communities.” (Choosing Our Leaders in the Forthcoming Elections, 2.2.4. p. 4)

2. DEMOCRATIC LEADERS:

“Good leaders listen to their people and they always involve other people in their programs. They accommodate views of other people. They promote human rights for all and democratic values starting from their political party. We need leaders who put the welfare of all people at heart. We want leaders who believe in the fundamental goodness, freedom and dignity of all people and each person. Leaders must be keen to work with others and to promote them, to create opportunities for others, to mobilize the talents and resources of their people, to allow them to participate and contribute to national development. Genuine democratic leaders will often consult and listen to others, will properly delegate, share power, make corporate decisions and give credit where it belongs. Democratic leaders favour democracy within their own parties as well as in the Government of the country. They also favour the emergence of young and new leadership. We need leaders who are able to rise above the limited particular interest of their political party and think of the whole Nation.” (Choosing Our Leaders in The Forthcoming Elections, 2.2.6. p.4-5)

3. GOD-FEARING PERSON:

“Being a God-fearing Nation, Malawi needs leaders who are genuinely God-fearing in spirit and truth... Malawi needs leaders who will in truth respect our religious traditions, our faith, the moral fibre of society as well as the multi-religious nature of our country as enshrined in the bill of rights of the Republican Constitution.” (Choosing Our Leaders in the Forthcoming Elections 2.2.6. p.5)

A Visionary Leader:

“A leader must be a person of vision, one who is able to set goals and objectives together with the community. The goals should be realized for the development and growth of the community. People's hopes, dreams and aspirations must be picked up by our leaders and helped to be fulfilled and so contribute to the advancement of social life and quality of life of communities.” (Taking Responsibility for Our Future; Together Towards the 2009 Elections 2.2.6. p.12)

Exemplary Leaders:

“Malawi needs leaders who are exemplary morally, socially and spiritually. A leader must lead by good examples in words and deeds. He must be a person of unquestionable character and personality. He must use his talents for the common good and never for personal enrichment.” (Taking Responsibility for Our Future; Together Towards the 2009 Elections 2.2.6. p.12)

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT - 1ST MARCH 2009

1. THEME: STARTING AFRESH

Introduction

In our life, God gives opportunity for us to start all over again. In the old days, God did these through Noah. In a special way, God has also given a similar opportunity to modern people to start new life again through Jesus Christ.



2. UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S SCRIPTURE

First Reading (Gen. 9:8-15)

- (a) Through this scripture, God is making the first covenant of all the covenants which He had been making with our ancestors (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) before the covenant at Mount Sinai.
- (b) When our ancestors sinned, God wanted to destroy the earth, but then through Noah, his family together with all the creatures that were in the ark, God wants to re-create the earth.
- (c) God wants that people (human beings) together with all creatures should have new life.
- (d) On His side, when God promises, He keeps His covenant. The rainbow is a sign that God is both promising and confirming that He will never destroy the earth with floods.

Psalm 24:

God is faithful and loving to those who keep His covenant.

Second Reading (1 Petro 3: 18-22)

- (a) Jesus Christ, who is just, gave us new life and served us unjust people by dying on the cross for us.
- (b) The salvation that Noah received symbolizes the one we have received in Jesus Christ.

The Gospel (Mark 1: 12-15)

- (a) For forty days, among with animals and angels, Jesus overcame the temptations of Satan.

- (b) Jesus Christ stayed well (amicably) with wild animals in the desert just like Adam was doing before his fall.
- (c) His message of Salvation was: "This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel!" (Mk1:15)

3. THE LESSONS

- (a) God is just and does not condemn evil. The floods were a result of the sinfulness of the people.
- (b) God has a special interest on what we do. He intervenes when people are becoming weak, hating and fighting each other. He does not intervene to destroy but to create a new.
- (c) God is merciful and faithful in keeping His promises. Since He gave us human beings authority over all creatures He does not want to destroy us but to transform everything to be better than before.
- (d) In the same way God united with Noah in serving the people and creation, Christians are supposed to be united with God in establishing a new earth.
- (e) Proverb – The responsibility to change things is in our hands. But then, we cannot change things if we have not changed ourselves. Therefore every person must become new by making sure that he/she has to remove the evil of his/her heart that is characterized by behaviors like pride, envy (jealousy), hatred, theft, murder, prostitution, falsehood, witchcraft and other sins.
- (f) When we become new people, we shall have freedom and the dignity of the children of God. We shall be able to restore the relationship between human beings and other creatures just like it was at the beginning in the Garden of Eden. Just like Jesus in the wilderness, we shall "stay together with wild animals while being saved by angels" meaning living in peace, justice and serenity between we people and all the creatures.

4. TEACHINGS FROM BISHOPS' PASTORAL LETTERS

"As Christians, we are the light and the salt of the world. Our vocation is not to conform to the world, but rather to transform the world by keeping God's commandments".
(Come Back to Me And Live 5.1.0. p.21)

- (a) “We invite you as Christians to promote once again the fear of God in our society. We ask you to re-dedicate the world to God by faithfully living out the gospel and proclaiming it in the word and deed (by keeping god’s commandments)...

We further invite you to sanctify the world by renewing your commitment to the manifold prayers and devotional practices of the church...” **(Come Back to Me And Live 3.2.3. p. 8)**

- (b) “We need once again to dedicate ourselves and the earth to the creator and redeemer. We should profess our faith openly without shame or embarrassment, for if we are ashamed of Him here on earth, He will be ashamed of us before His Father in(MK.8:38)” **(Come Back to Me And Live 3.2.4 P.9)**

“As Christians and as citizens it is our privilege but also our duty to participate in the electoral process according to our taste in life and as the particular matter in question demands. Through our votes and through holding public offices we can influence public policies and governance with gospel values which can transform our social life. We know that our action and participation with the support of the Grace of God, we can renew and transform the face of the earth. God counts on us to transform our world. He will not replace our action. Things will not just happen just because we wish them to happen.” **(Choosing Our Leaders In the Forthcoming Elections 2.1. p.1-2)**

5. POINTS FOR REFLECTION

On 19th May 2009, as is the lesson from today’s readings, God is giving us another opportunity to improve the earth and make it a new creation. What does it mean to be a new creation? What is important is to get united with God to choose wisely. We should reflect on the following:

- (a) How do we differentiate between a leader who wants to improve the earth from the one who simply wants to be leader but has no concern about the people?
- (b) What new things shall the leaders we shall vote into office bring?
- (c) What will the leaders do to improve on matters of economy, employment, education, people’s behavior, development, conservation of the environment and other issues?

SECOND SUNDAY OF THE LENT - 8TH MARCH 2009



1. THEME: MAY OUR FAITH TRANSFORM OUR LIFE AND THE NATION

Introduction

Through our faith in God we shall be in communion with our Lord Jesus. Thus in doing so we shall be holy people and free from fear in the work of transforming our life and the Nation.

2. UNDERSTANDING TODAY’S SCRIPTURE

First Reading: (Genesis 22:1-2, 9a 10-13, 15-18)

- (a) God promised Abraham that he will make his descendants as numerous as stars and the grains of sand on the seashore. Today God puts Abraham’s faith to test by asking him to offer his only son Isaac as a burnt sacrifice. In so doing God seems to contradict his own promise.
- (b) Abraham showed a deep faith by accepting to offer his own son, very own beloved son as a burnt sacrifice. Through Abraham’s faith, God fulfilled his willingness to bless and bring salvation to all mankind

Psalms 115 (116)

The Servant of the Lord puts his trust in him all the time and is never afraid to face problems in his life. He offers his own life as thanksgiving to the Lord.

Second Reading (Romans 8:31b-34)

Our faith assures us that God is with us (Emmanuel). He loves us, helps us and does not want to go against us or punish us (Romans 8:31). Through faith no one can be against us. In assurance of his love, God gave us his only Son to die for us on the Cross.

The Gospel (Mark 9:2-10)

- (a) Jesus transfigured in the presence of three categories of witness:
- Moses (laws) and Elijah (prophet) representing the old testament;
 - The three disciples of Jesus; Peter, Jacob and John
 - The father, (the word from heaven)

- (b) The role of peter and Elijah is being fulfilled in Jesus just as the father assured us that Jesus is the only promised Messiah
- (c) The disciples who saw Jesus transfigured in glory on the mountain are the same who will give testimony to the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane.
The Transfiguration of Jesus Christ shows the future glory and strengthens the faith of the disciples who will see him in suffering and being crucified.

3. THE LESSONS

- (a) Just as Abraham faithfully offered his very own beloved son as a sacrifice likewise we two can do wonders with our faith.
- (b) In recognition of God’s love, who offered his only son as a sacrifice let us also believe that he will assist us to transform our world. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross is a sign of his entry offering in showing unconditional love of God us. Let us also faithfully and lovingly offer ourselves to transform our life and the Nation.
- (c) God is merciful, talented and good indeed. He has chosen to be on our side. He will never let Satan, sin, death and violence defeat us his children. He wants us all to be in a lovely, peaceful and just world on this earth and grows with him to everlasting life
- (d) Jesus alone is the Savior of the world. The Law and the Prophets which were fulfilled in the New Testament were only a preparation for the Messiah. We too are called to join with our Lord Jesus in the work of transforming our world in choosing the right leaders who will bring love, peace, development and justice among us.

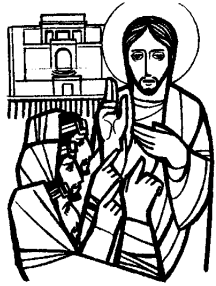
4. TEACHINGS FROM BISHOPS’ PASTORAL LETTERS

“Dear brothers and sisters, as people of God who are reborn in Christ, it is in prayers that we find strength to witness, both in word and deed in all spheres of our life. We shall be known to be disciples who are the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Mathew 5:13-16), by our works and the fruits we bear. Our very lives, our relationships in the families, in the small Christian Communities, in places of work and in the business world ought to be our testimony to the lord and manifestation and proclamation of who we are in the lord” **(Deepening Our Christian Life: (Page 8).)**

“We are all called to deepen our faith since faith is the “Soul” and the basis of our Christian life”. **(Deepening Our Christian life Page 11)**

5. POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- (a) How does our faith help us transform our world?
- (b) Just as the work of Moses and Elijah was fulfilled in Jesus. What should we do to enable ourselves pass on and handover our various roles/responsibilities?
- (c) How can we recognise those Malawians that love their country and wish it well?
- (d) How can we be a light to the people who pledge their allegiance to a party or a leader ignorantly?
- (e) How can we identify leaders who are ready to make sacrifices for the good of our nation?



THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT - 15TH MARCH 2009

1. THEME: GOD'S COMMANDMENTS ENLIGHTEN US AND HELP US TO PURIFY OUR HEARTS

Introduction

By giving us His commandments God showed us His mercy/love in His desire to purify us.

2. UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S SCRIPTURE

First Reading (EXODUS 20:1-17)

Even before giving the Ten Commandments, God showed love to the Israelites. He freed them from slavery in Egypt; He served them in the Red Sea, He fed them with squeals and manna in the wilderness; He provided them water from a rock and He served them from their enemies, the Amelikites.

Believing in One God, the Israelites distinguish themselves from other nations which believed in the existence of other gods.

On Mount Sinai God gave the Israelites commandments to teach them about what it means to Love Him and their neighbor; this is why the first three commandments teach about "loving your God with all your heart, all your life and all your power" (Dt 6:5) The remaining seven commandments teach about loving our neighbor the way we love ourselves (Lev, 19:186)

Psalm (19: 8-11)

(a) God's commandments are firm and honest and they strengthen the weak to survive in times of problems. They give intelligence and wisdom to do good things.

(b) God's commandments are a light of our way of life.

Second Reading (1 COR 1:22-25)

(a) The Cross is God's assurance of His love for us all.

(b) To the Jews and the Greeks, the cross was a sign of failure, but to those believing in Christ; the Cross is the source of wisdom and the power of God.

(c) What looks like foolishness before God, is beyond the wisdom of human beings and is more powerful than the power of human beings.

The Gospel (Jn 2: 13-25)

(a) The Lord Jesus shows His richness and power during the Jewish Passover feast by cleansing the Temple.

(b) Our Lord Jesus wanted that the Jewish leaders, Priests and Pharisees should know that He is truly the promised Messiah.

(c) By cleasing the Temple, the Lord Jesus shows that God's Kingdom is at hand, he is therefore bringing an end to the practice of mixing up religionand monetary gains.

3. THE LESSONS

(a) God's commandments show us what God expects from us.

(b) Jesus Christ's shows us the intelligence and wisdom of God.

(c) By chasing people in God's house, Jesus is teaching us that God is never happy when people play with His house.

(d) We are God's house just like the Lord Jesus did in cleansing God's house, we need to be cleansed all the time.

(e) As we are preparing to choose our leaders on 19th May this year, we should scrutinize thoroughly and choose only those leaders that will not condone or practice corruption and misuse Government property, a behaviour that makes people loose trust in their leaders.

4. TEACHINGS FROM BISHOPS' PASTORAL LETTERS

Called to renew our lives and society

"Concluding our examination of some of the circumstances of our life today, we, your bishops, believe that the current social ills will not be overcome solely by political or social remedies because, for us, the true nature of the evil facing our country is moral. For us "the principle obstacle to be overcome on the way to authentic liberation

is sin and the structures produced by sin as it multiplies and spreads. The sins of individuals and the sinful structures built into our systems actually reinforce one another- and thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behavior. An authentic conversion is necessary, a conversion which is both individual and collective. This remains the key to comprehension remedy for our social ills." (**Renewing Our Lives and Society with the power of the Holy Spirit 6.0. p.10**)

5. POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- (a) What should we do so that our hearts should really be God's house?
- (b) What should we do so that Christians should not use Jesus name in cheating people that they will gain worth healing, marriage, work or promotion at work?
- (c) Since we are God's Temple, what should we do so as not to let politicians turn us into instruments of violence, rigging of votes, threatening others or removing peace and stability in society?
- (d) What should we do to avoid choosing people who are corrupt; those that turn parliament and our country into a place where they can steal others money (worthy, property) to make themselves rich; those that use people to rise into office, gain power, respect and worth but are never concerned with the good of those people that put them into power.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT – 22ND MARCH 2009



1. THEME: BELIEVE IN THE CRUCIFIED JESUS CHRIST

Introduction

Jesus Christ was crucified for our sins. By dying on the cross, he testified God's unlimited love for us.

2. UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S SCRIPTURE

First Reading (2 Chronicles 36:14-16; 19-23)

King Zedekiah, all the leading priests and the people were exceedingly unfaithful, doing all abominations of the nations. They polluted the house of the Lord by investing their trust in Baal worship, diviners, sorcery, witchcraft, by shading blood of innocent people and by establishing treaties with countries that displeased God.

The Lord, God of their fathers, sent warnings persistently to them through his messengers like Jeremiah, Habakkuk and other minor prophets because he had compassion for them. They kept mocking the messengers, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, till the wrath of the Lord rose against them.

In 587 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. Many people were killed, young and old alike, and the rest of the Jews were taken to Babylon. The Jews knew that this defeat and humiliation came about because they broke the covenant with God.

Psalm 136 (137)

Throughout the Babylonian captivity, the people of Israel never stopped longing for their return home.

Second Reading (Ephesians 2:4-10)

"But God, who is rich in Mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God..."

Gospel Reading (John 3: 14-21)

- (a) While in the wilderness the Israelites turned away from God. As a result they were bitten by poisonous snakes. God instructed Moses to lift up the serpent so that whoever looked at it with faith would be saved.

- (b) In the same way the crucified Jesus is lifted up so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
- (c) Jesus Christ is the light and source of eternal life. Although this is the case, Jesus faced stiff opposition and rejection because people preferred darkness to light since their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light.

3. THE LESSONS

- (a) Sin punishes the sinner: Just as the Jews were taken into Babylonian exile for ignoring and rejecting prophetic calls, we may also face severe punishment if we do not take heed of God's advice.
- (b) God's love and mercy are immeasurable; he wants all of us to be saved. We only have to believe, trust and follow the instructions given by the crucified Jesus.
- (c) For a genuine change, we need to be open minded to look back at our past mistakes.
- (d) We need to be converted and be illumined by Jesus Christ, confessing our sins, renouncing our past life, being honest and just in all our deeds. For whoever lives the truth comes to light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done by God.

4. TEACHINGS FROM BISHOPS' PASTORAL LETTERS

"Period of elections offers citizens a unique opportunity to take stock and evaluate the state of the nation's economy, education, health, governance, leadership performance, developmental achievements etc. It is time to choose and confirm successful leaders and replace those that have failed us." (**Choosing Our Leaders, 2. P.1**)

"On the part of the electorate, this is time to exercise a spirit of discernment. Voters should not allow themselves to be misled by false promises. Winning votes through handouts is a malpractice that is growing in our community and this practice should not be encouraged. No amount of material inducement should be allowed to stand in the way of the electorate towards choosing the right candidates. They should be wary of anybody promising heaven on earth without equally exhorting people to work hard." (**Taking Responsibility for Our Future: Together towards the 2009 elections, 2.2.3 P.10**)

"Let us all take up our responsibilities and together transform Malawi so that it indeed becomes a country of peace and prosperity. Only in and with the Lord can a better Malawi be realized." (**Taking Responsibility for Our Future: Together towards the 2009 elections, 3.0. p.15**)

5. POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- (a) What mistakes have we (politicians, priests and citizens) committed that are not pleasant before God?
- (b) How does our daily life portray the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the source of salvation?
- (c) Which areas of our lives have we been reluctant to change despite the many pieces of advice we have received? And how have we insulted and mocked God's messengers today?
- (d) If we don't take heed to God's advice through his messengers, what should our nation expect in retribution?
- (e) On the cross of Christ the following words were inscribed: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews (INRI). How does Jesus Christ influence your daily life?
- (f) How does Jesus' Kingship differ from the rest of the leaders we know? What can we do to ensure that leadership in this country is Jesus' leadership?
- (g) What guiding principles can help us elect leaders who are development conscious and action oriented against those who are verbal?

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT - 29TH MARCH 2009



1. THEME: NEW HEART, NEW WORLD

Introduction

Human's heart is the source of all goodness or evil. What makes a man/woman bad is not what comes out into him/her, but what comes out from inside him/her. If we take away the heart of stone and put in the heart of flesh we will be able to build a new Malawi, where unity, love, justice, peace and development will abide.

2. UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S SCRIPTURE

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34

In the Old Testament, God led the Israelites "by hand" from slavery in Egypt up to Mount Sinai where he gave them the Ten Commandments (inscribed on stone tablets) and made a covenant with them. In this covenant God promised the Israelites that he will defend and take care of them. On their part, the Israelites promised to obey God. When they reached Canaan, God was faithful to his promise, but the Israelites were not. Consequently Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom in the year 722 BC and the people were deported to different countries. And in the year 587BC, the Jews of the southern kingdom were deported to Babylon as slaves.

The prophet Jeremiah promises that God wants to free the Israelites and make with them another covenant. This new covenant will be different from the old one. Its commandments will not be written on stone tablets. God Himself will write the new commandments on the people's hearts, so that there will be no need for some one to teach another.

Psalm 51

When King David committed adultery with the wife of Uriah, he humbled himself and confessed, asking God to forgive him and make him a new person.

Second Reading: Hebrews 5: 7-9)

- (a) The letter to the Hebrews was written about 600 years after Jeremiah had promised the new covenant (see first reading)
- (b) The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that God has shown his love and mercy when he came down and become man and took all the consequences of humanity on himself and took away all that would prevent us from knowing him from receiving his gifts.

- (c) In Jesus Christ, God has become like us in everything except sin. Jesus Christ as the High Priest want to bring us all to God.
- (d) Jesus Christ, human like us, is praying in agony and learns to obey in suffering when he establishes the new covenant.

The Gospel (John 12: 20 – 33)

The Greeks want to see Jesus so that they may know him well; they may deepen their knowledge of God and know the truth.

They go to see Jesus out through Phillip, because he had a Greek name. Phillip informs Andrew and the two of them inform Jesus. The coming of the Greeks signified that the death of Jesus on the cross will be like a seed planted in the soil which will give glory and life everlasting to all people on earth.

3. THE LESSONS

- (a) Even though the commandments of the O.T were good, they were like sign posts, showing us where to go. They were not able to give us strength to move ahead.
- (b) As God has made himself humble and come down to be with us, we too have to be humble and obedient through all our life.
- (c) As the seed planted in the soil dies to produce much fruit, God gives us life and different gifts, that we may use them devotedly when serving others, and not to enrich ourselves, or seek power and glory. When we loose life is when we find it. When we die is when we live. As a candle gives light by melting, so too our lives should be a sacrifice that gives glory to God in the highest and bring peace here on earth.
- (d) Let us be united with God who is establishing his kingdom here on earth, by taking away everything bad, and bringing God's goodness. Let us remove proud people, those who are greedy and seek their honor. Let us choose humble people who are ready to serve and not to be served.

4. TEACHINGS FROM BISHOPS' PASTORAL LETTERS

"What people are seeking is genuine democracy in which leaders are servants of the people who elected them and not their masters, in which leaders are answerable and

accountable for their actions to those they lead, a true government of the people; not government by or for the privileged few. What is at stake in all of this is nothing less than the search for new forms of society and true forms of freedoms, justice and peace” (**Choosing Our Future, 2 p.4-5**)

“What is discouraging is that sometimes we see different political parties quarrelling without profound reasons. It looks as if what they want is that their party should win, without taking into consideration the needs of the people of this country” we ask the party leaders that they should not be concerned with only enriching themselves on the wealth of this country. The wealth of this country is for the whole country and should serve everybody.” It is necessary that all those who are in power, should be faithful at their work, and should do their work punctually and in justice especially on the wealth of this country” **Walking together in faith**

“We cannot do away with poverty on our lives, by just giving money, food, clothes, and other things. What we need is education on development, so that people can help themselves..... A leader should encourage people to work hard so that they can depend on themselves. This equally means that “every person has a right to a just reward for work done, a wage which will ensure a dignified living for his or her family. (**Come back to me and Live 3.3.5. P.12**)

“Malawians must learn to bear with one another and to respect one another regardless of political affiliations... Love is the core, the trunk and the spirit for humanity in the world.” (**Renewing Our Lives and Society ... 2006**)

5. POINTS FOR REFLECTION

Just as the Greeks chose Phillip and Andrew to present them to Jesus, let us also ask God to give us wisdom to so that we can choose leaders who can present us well. When we meet let us discuss and help each other on the following points:

- (a) How can we transform our country?
- (b) What can we do to uproot bad leaders from our midst who do not keep their promises; who are bad, proud and greedy and instead put in leaders who are humble, loving and ready to serve their people?
- (c) How can we help each other to choose wisely the people who:-
 - are not only for power but who are ready to serve?
 - are not only sweet at talking but have wise leadership?

- are not only for good chairs, but who have foresight, can see far in the future, and know what they want to do?
- are not only there to enrich themselves, but who know how to take care of the economy and other things of this country?
- do not encourage bad habits, such as theft, but who are ready to do away with hunger and poverty in this country?
- do not call bad names, but who appreciate the wisdom and gifts which God has given to other people?
- do not give money and other things, but who can teach people to depend on themselves and who can teach people to participate in development works?
- do not go to parliament to behave childishly, but who go there to establish laws that will help to develop the country?
- do not only follow what the leaders of their political party want, but who will do what the people who voted for them want?
- will not change the constitution only to benefit one person or one group, but who can follow and defend the constitution of our beautiful country?
- are not corrupt, but who are honest, faithful, and of good reputation?
- believe in God not only by mouth alone but believe in God in spirit and truth?
- do not want to step down from their positions, but who give chance to others, especially the youth, so that they too can participate in leadership?

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION – 5th April 2009



1. THEME: THE CROSS IS THE WAY TO SALVATION

Introduction

We are beginning the Holy Week that celebrates the passion, death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is a week during which we shall experience change. We begin this holy season with songs and a procession of joy while singing 'Hosanna'! We shall change and begin to shout 'Crucify him!' as soon as we enter the church and on Good Friday. The end of this Holy Week shall be marked by hymns of triumph when, on Easter Sunday, we shall sing; 'He is risen! The tomb is empty!

2. UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S SCRIPTURE

First Reading (Isaiah 50: 4-7)

- (a) Isaiah says, the servant of God has been sent to be a prophet whose duty shall be that of consoling those that are burdened and tired
- (b) The servant shall suffer hardships; people will reject him and continue to scourge, to insult and spit on him.
- (c) Despite all these hardships, the servant remains faithful and God strengthens him.

Psalm

The servant of the Lord is suffering but does not despair because he relies on God's help.

Second Reading (Phil. 2:6-11)

- (a) Jesus Christ emptied and humbles himself completely by leaving his divine state to join and participate in our humanity.
- (b) He gave himself completely by accepting to suffer and to die a humiliating death on the cross.

- (c) By rising from the dead, God exalted Jesus Christ and made him king of all things.

Gospel (Mk. 14: 1 – 15:47)

- (a) The suffering and death of Jesus Christ are the way that brings salvation. It is God the Father who willed that Jesus should take this suffering way.
- (b) The religious leaders, government and political leaders including the whole crowd of people rejected him and shouted that he should be crucified.
- (c) The centurion recognised that Jesus was the true Son of God after he had seen the manner in which he had died on the cross (Mk. 15:39).

3. THE LESSONS

- (a) Sufferings do not prevent the coming of the reign of God; rather, they are a way that helps the establishment of God's kingdom and a way that leads us to eternal life.
- (b) The term Hosanna means 'God save us!' People are singing *Hosanna* for Jesus the humble King who was riding on donkey. Jesus does not enter Jerusalem with the intention of confronting the political leaders. His mission is to defeat satan, sin and death. Jesus does not use force but humbles himself as an obedient servant of the Lord till his death on the cross.
- (c) In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed to his Father. He loved, trusted and was always obedient to his Father. His prayer confirms that he was indeed a human person who needed to be loved, strengthened and consoled during moments of trouble. We too, in our human frailty, need to build our life on the solid foundation of the rock which is our faith in God the Father.
- (d) During the moment of suffering, Jesus remains quite not because he was afraid, but because he did not want to give in to any sinful act. We too, should never give in to bad habits even when people curse or insult us, beat or laugh at us, or even when others shout and inflict all sorts of injuries on us.
- (e) Just like the centurion was enlightened when he saw how Jesus died, our eyes too should be opened after realising the unlimited love that God the Father has shown us by allowing that his only Son die on the cross for our salvation.

4. TEACHINGS FROM BISHOPS' PASTORAL LETTERS

“In carrying out our mission we are bound to be misunderstood and called up to pay heavily...But, then, this is not surprising. Our Lord himself was misunderstood.” (**Choosing Our Future**, p. 3)

“Christ who suffered a violent death said, ‘*Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God*’ (Mt 5:9). And after the resurrection he wished his disciples the gift of peace (Luke 24:36). Let us open our hearts to the peace which the risen Christ offers us.” (**Rejoicing and Vigilantly Living in Hope** pp. 3 – 4)

“Following the example and teaching of Jesus Christ, we are challenged to take seriously our responsibility to live his message of love, justice, peace, and reconciliation in our concrete life situations.” (**Taking Responsibility for Our Future**, p. 2)

5. POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- (a) What can we do to make the passion and death of Jesus Christ on the cross become an opportunity for us to be servants of the Lord?
- (b) How different are we from the crowd of people that joyfully sung ‘*Hosanna!*’ when Jesus entered Jerusalem and shouted ‘*crucify him!*’ shortly after, during the same week?
- (c) Just like the people of the past did when they crucified Jesus, how do we, church and political leaders including all people, agree in destroying our country these days?
- (d) On 19th May, how are we going to demonstrate that we want to uproot evil and replace it with goodness among us?

FINAL REMARKS

During this Lenten season, God has given us an opportunity to prepare for Easter as well as the forthcoming General Elections.

May his Word and the Bishops’ Pastoral Letters that we have been reflecting upon during this season assist us to uproot evil in our life so as to replace it with God’s goodness in our society. God’s love is unlimited and he wants us to recreate a new Malawi.

We all should strive to work hard so as to become achievers because God counts on us to transform and make our country a better place to live in. If we do not act, who else will come to transform our country? If it is not during the Elections of 19th May 2009, when else can we rectify those elements that are not good in our country and society?

