

BIBLE STUDY 3 – 10 July, 2003

by Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane

I greet you all in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. I am constrained by the Spirit to put aside the text that I had prepared for this morning and to share with you something that is deep in my heart. It does, of course, affect the theme that is set aside for today: "Togetherness". There is that wonderful passage in Scripture which says that we are "the Body of Christ and when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer". Therefore, I want to share with you something that comes from the depth of my heart, and I crave indulgence from the organisers of this programme, that I deviate from what I have been asked to do.

I am deeply troubled, deeply saddened and deeply alarmed that this assembly has not given much attention to one of the major Goliaths before it, and that is HIV and Aids. I am reliably informed that three major tracts which were tasked to do this, the Church Leaders Group, Justice and Transformation, have swept this issue aside, either as irrelevant or divisive or that people have brought it on themselves. I just want to appeal to this assembly to take this Goliath very, very seriously.

As I speak, people are being affected and people are dying. We are concerned about people. The Cardinal (Napier) talked about life the other day. We are also concerned about life, about the preservation of life. Our quest for church unity, our quest for being together should not mean that we should not face issues square on. It's not on that we try to sweep this under the carpet. We cannot hide it under a bush. We cannot play ostrich philosophy and pretend that it is not there. We have a divine mandate to bring hope to the hopeless, help to the needy, to hear the cries of the people. After all, we have a God who hears our cry, who listens to us, who comes down and helps us, and our God has called us as these leaders of His Church to bring hope to the helpless, to bring help to the needy, to bring healing and care to the sick and poor. We cannot, and I repeat, we cannot, bury our heads in the sand and pretend that everything is okay when we have a Goliath that has reached pandemic proportions. And so my plea even at this late hour – and I know it is the third day – is that we give attention to this.

Do you know that in this beautiful continent of Africa – not what we were told the other day "the darkest continent of Africa" – which is the cradle of humanity, more people die daily from HIV/Aids-related illnesses than people died on September 11. God has given us a wonderful gift of forgetfulness. On that day, the whole world stood still, but in our continent we have people who are dying daily, many more than those who died on September 11. I am grateful that yesterday we were able to give opportunity for those of us who are HIV positive to come forward and give a testimony, and even more grateful that the leadership of this family were able to say prayers. I am sure they feel affirmed. And thank God for that.

But we should do more than that. Did you know that 25% of the adult population of South Africa is HIV positive? If that is so, there may be some HIV positive people around us here who are scared stiff to come out because of the stigma. What pained me yesterday was an insinuation linking sexual immorality with HIV/Aids. That was very hurtful and my pastoral heart reaches out to all the people who are HIV positive in this country who are created in God's image and loved and cared for by God. We, who are church leaders and guardians of eternal values, stewards of God's Creation, need to be reaching out with care and love to our sisters and brothers who are HIV positive. To say they have caused it themselves is rather unfortunate.

Did you know that 67% of women who are HIV positive in this country contracted the disease in faithful marriage relationships. We heard a testimony yesterday. I minister to young women who tell me painful stories of being rejected by their husbands who in the first instance may have been the cause of where they are. In my study the other day, I had a group of young people, one of them just burst out and said: "Archbishop, does anybody care whether we live or whether we die?" I said: "I care. We care. And the churches care." And I want to call on you, my sisters and brothers, that this assembly should send a strong message to those people who are living with Aids, and say: "We do care. We want to help. We want to embrace you in our love." When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer.

And then, of course, there is the case of the orphans. I just want to say, if you have not met an HIV/Aids orphan, go and meet with him or her. I have met with them. Those eyes continue to haunt me. Four-year-olds, six-year-olds. You ask them: "Where is your mother?" She says: "She is dead." "Where

is your father?" She answers: "He is dead." I ask "Who is looking after you?" She says: "Grandmother." I ask her: "What is going to happen when Grandmother dies?" She says: "I don't know." And as I move away, those eyes just stare at me saying: "There is another adult who is abandoning me."

Just think how traumatised those children are. Just think if that is your beloved grandchild who has been left orphaned. Just think, I could only bear seeing a dead person in my adult life when I was a priest. Think of a four-year-old experiencing death, being left by both parents. And then think of those grandmothers who in their frailty, in their poverty, in their grief, have to look after these young ones. They must be worrying as to what is going to happen to them.

We have a crisis. If your eyes are not open, the Scripture says: "Let those who have ears, let them hear." We have a crisis in our midst. We talked about crime. If these children are not properly brought up, what future is there. We talk about a hope with the future. We talk about being real Christians in a real South Africa. What future are we preparing for these children? Think about it. We have a crisis, we need to address it before it becomes a catastrophe.

Statistics tell us that by 2010 there will be 10 million orphans in Southern Africa. And so I just want to bare my heart to you, and share this heavy burden I have that, as Christians who name the Name of Jesus, who are entrusted by God with the caring of the world, who are stewards of His mysteries, let us commit ourselves. We are serious when we say we want a hope for the future. We are serious when we say we are real Christians for South Africa. and, therefore, we need to commit ourselves in the first instance to fight stigma. Stigma decimates families. Stigma annihilates hope. It is that which prevents people from coming out and being tested in the early stages.

Secondly, let us declare that HIV/Aids is not a punishment from God. The worldwide Anglican communion has said so already and I invite you, all of us in South Africa, as leaders of the churches, to say HIV/Aids is not a punishment from God. We shout from the roof tops, we shout from our pulpits, that it is a disease like any other. Let us commit ourselves to providing loving care and support to all who are HIV positive. After all, that is the fundamental of our ministry, offering care, offering hope, offering support, offering love. It is that, when people living with Aids are given that loving support, live longer lives. Let us say as the Body of Christ, that – "If one part of the body suffers, we all suffer." Nobody should suffer alone, and nobody should die alone.

One church leader I talked to yesterday said: "It is good to talk as I am talking, but it is another thing when you minister to a dying Aids person. When you have to wash him and care for him." Let's commit ourselves to caring, loving and supporting those who are living with Aids. Let's give special attention to the orphans. Let's teach our young people, in particular, responsible sexual behaviour based on the Kingdom values.

Lastly, I invite you all, to enter into strategic partnerships with business, government, trade unions, with the NGOs to form strategic alliances to fight this Goliath so that we can have a generation without Aids.

We used to say during apartheid times that apartheid was too big an issue for a divided people, a divided Church. This giant is too big for a nation, for a Church that is divided. All of us, as the Body of Christ, as the people of God, entrusted with the stewardship of this world by God, should hold our hands together and say: "Let's work together for a generation without Aids."