

## **CARDINAL BRISLIN’S CELEBRATION WITH THE CLERGY OF CAPE TOWN**

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1 NOVEMBER 2023 – READINGS OF THE DAY

One has to admit, the parting line of our Gospel this morning is a little complicated, given the reason for our celebration ... that some who are last will be first and the first will be last ... But like all Gospel interpretation, context is everything...

In today’s Gospel Jesus has turned towards Jerusalem – as the place of obedience, completion, and fulfilment. The place of holiness where ultimately, he will institute the Eucharist, establish the Church, and initiate the Kingdom of God.

Today’s Gospel is the first time after setting his face towards Jerusalem that Luke reminds the reader that Jerusalem is still Jesus’ destination. Until now, for nearly two chapters in Luke, Jesus has been teaching about the Kingdom – comparing it to mustard seeds, leaven, and lamps, reminding us to read the signs of the times. And now in answer to a question from ‘someone’, Jesus teaches us about HOW we enter the Kingdom of God. Until now Jesus has taught about the Kingdom and today, he teaches about citizenship. And he tells us:

1. It is about striving for the narrow gate, where actions must meet expectations and words are backed by deeds.
2. Then Jesus reminds us not to rest on our laurels, that membership of Church is not enough, the kingdom requires discipleship and commitment, because the Kingdom is not ours by right but by relationship, a relationship with Jesus Christ lived in our concrete situations, where we are, who we are and because of Jesus Christ.

And so that opening question of the Gospel today, “are those who will be saved few in number?” is answered in the last line, that “they will come from east and west, from north and south and take their places at the table in the Kingdom... Some who were first will be last, and some who were last will be first ...”. You see, the ‘someone’ who asked the question of Jesus was clearly and intentionally referencing the Jewish exclusion of Gentiles from Salvation, by birth and covenant. Jesus explains that he has come that all may have life and citizenship of the Kingdom and so the first being last and the last being first is an upset of the designs of human construct and a challenge to our preconceptions about holiness and purity. What Jesus is reminding us of is that we have no right nor claim to heaven, only to discipleship lived in truth and expressed in love. That gives us a seat at the table in the Kingdom, that heavenly citizenship is ultimately up to us being open to, accepting, and living God’s grace. That is what determines who is first and who is last, how we live our discipleship in Jesus Christ, that we respond, that we are open to his grace in our lives, all according to our circumstances. That is Kingdom greatness.

Your Eminence, that in essence has been your consistent response to interviews, where you quote Pope Francis to remind others (and yourself), that elevation to the College of Cardinals is not about honour or apparel, but about service, never forgetting our context, our people, its

challenges, and God's grace. As you said to America magazine, what in South Africa we still need is reconciliation and healing, where justice serves to bring peace and the church ministers to society by modelling the Kingdom. But as you told Cape Talk listeners, we also cannot do this alone. In our multi-cultural society, we need to work together with all people of faith, ecumenical and inter-religions, to build and promote a just society, where leadership is held to account, trust is restored, and hope becomes an expression of the common good.

Capetonians and especially Catholic Capetonians, see your elevation also as an honour for all of us our Archdiocese - that a Red Hat was placed also on Table Mountain. But President Ramaphosa reminded us all that your elevation is a symbol and sign of hope to all South Africans that "should inspire us to exercise our beliefs, in our diversity, with deep devotion". The truth is you no longer belong only to us, but now to all South Africans and to the Church. You represent our voice, our hope, our recognition in the Church and subsequently our place in the world.

If, however, we are honest in our assessment of honours, this is primarily a tribute to you, as a person, a priest and as a bishop. In the modern church, Red Hats don't simply come up with the rations upon appointment to a specific diocese. Red hats are a representation of the diversity and scope of the universal church granted it the individuals for the diversity they represent and what they stand for. While it may feel like the Red Hat has returned to the mother See of South Africa, which is arguably even backed by the history of our Diocese, whose one time name was Mauritius, the Cape of Good Hope and all adjacent islands - which included Australia ... but the truth is this is an honour in recognition of your contribution to the Church, of who you are, what you stand for and how you contribute to building a just society and the Kingdom of God. It is very much your honour.

Born into a family of new converts in Welkom, faith and life were the same expression. From a quiet student whose vocation was apparent to his peers, to a seminarian whose conscience was formed by the Gospel, despite the influences of apartheid, recognising and celebrating racial equality. Even when you took time out from the seminary, it was with integrity, to re-join, complete, and be ordained 40 years ago this November. These were the foundations and formation of the Archbishop we have come to know over the past 13 years. A bishop who is firm but fair, quiet (for the most part) but with real backbone, someone who listens and genuinely tries to give the benefit of the doubt, who is equitable in opportunity ... who isn't scared to make the tough decisions, nor shies away from the unpopular ones. You are a leader who is recognised as such, by the respect afforded you by your brother Bishops of the SACBC by your doctorate in Pastoral Leadership from the Oblate school of Theology and now by your new role in the Universal Church. You are a priest who is prayerful and ultimately a pastor at heart. True to Church, but always in charity, as your motto declares.

These are the products of your past and the realities of your present, indicated in your coat of arms, a Basotho hat, an anchor and a star... *Mura wa lifatsi, ya entsing butle* – son of the soil, made good – trying always to live what you have taught and practice what you aspire to,

*veritas in caritate* taken from St. Paul as reminded to the Ephesians in Chapter 4, that truth in charity is how we grow, in all ways, to Christ.

Your eminence you have always tried to live by conscience, famously refusing to be conscripted in apartheid South Africa, prepared for jail if that be the consequence, where on record you declared, “I cannot act against my conscience, and so accept the consequences” – quiet but with backbone. Later that translated into membership of the Santa Marta Group to educate society and combat human trafficking, and participation in the group of bishops on the Holy Land, visiting, listening. and sharing with the people in their daily struggles. A reality and plight no easier today, violence and the escalation of violence, which makes the Kingdom of God seem less real, despite the imprints left by Jesus on the soil of that land. You have always preached love and prayer, that it is God's work not ours. A testimony to this lived out in Kroonstad and informed by your involvement in the lives of the people of your parish of Katlehong. *Motlepule* they call you, bringer of rain and blessing.

These are your accolades, your actions that help and have helped others see truth lived in charity, actions which in their largesse conceal a wry smile, a dry sense of humour and your love for animals, all the while masking your immense capacity for work and an external calmness, despite the raging storms – and they have come! All of this bares testimony to your faith, understood in prayer and lived in faithful priesthood – the joy of your life...

But now you have a new role, one which does not let you rest on your laurels, as the Gospel reminds us, discipleship in the Kingdom of God is about always striving for the narrow gate. In English, the words “strive” and “agony” interestingly have the same root. That despite the struggles and the frustrations your seat at the table God’s Kingdom, Your Eminence, now means answering a new dimension to your vocation, as a cardinal, and that too will come in its struggles difficulties, memes and challenges. You are now in the public eye and on the international stage, and while much of the work and intrigue of Cardinals is fodder for journalists, nothing captures the imagination more than the right of Cardinals, since 1057 under Pope Nicholas II, to elect a Pope.... eclipsed only by the fact that since 1522 only Cardinals IN the conclave have been elected. Your red hat comes with a possibility of a white zucchetto! And so as you take on your new responsibilities in the Universal Church, the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints and beyond, know that we, your clergy, are here for you. By ordination you have our respect and obedience, but know you also have our prayers and support. We too strive to build the Kingdom of God in Cape Town, but we accept and respect that now you too belong to South Africa and the Universal Church. We are proud to have you as our Archbishop, proud to call you our spiritual father and proud that as a true son of the soil, you represent us in Rome and to the world.

Congratulations Your Eminence.

*Ad multos annos.*