Sermon for the ‘Celebration of Independence for the South Sudan’

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Readings:
- Deuteronomy 28:1-14
- Psalm 107:1-8
- Romans 8:31-39
- John 15:12-17

May God’s peace be your peace.

It is an honour to be here today. Free at last. You are free at last! This today is a blessing. In your faithfulness, the lowliest of nations is set high amongst the nations, the 193rd nation in the World. All these blessings will come upon you, and accompany you.

You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and when you go out. The Lord will send a blessing on everything you put your hand to!

The Lord will establish you as His holy people, as he promised you, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in His ways.

Such is the nature and the truth of this day. The focus of the world today is on the people; you of the South Sudan, whose hope has been renewed by your resolve, your courage, your hope and your faithfulness. Your love as a people, who in times of great darkness, have journeyed in the promise of God’s marvellous light! Such is your resilience, that you have in 38 years and more of adversity, oppression, hunger and death, found new life in your independence and awesome freedom won at such a great cost.

The promises of God are expressed abundantly in today’s readings, but as ever, press us to reflect on our journey, our reality and present, and to be a people of hope and a prophetic voice in our thinking for the future.

We mark today with celebration, song, word and prayer; the way we know as God’s people. We come with the weight of the drama of the past and the weight of the responsibility for the future, and we are reminded that the joy of this day is a moment of refreshment. In the heaviness of what has been experienced and of all those you have loved; and now, the
management of expectations of building a new nation that will need to take with it all that it already is, and how it will need to form something out of the abundance of the great journey of wisdom out of oppression, and the practicalities of the stuff of infrastructure, it will require for basic governance and long term growth.

We know that as of today, in freedom, South Sudan has been at war for more than 38 of the 54 years of independence from colonial occupation and governance. It is a nation that as of today sits at the bottom of the developing world.

We know that the majority of the South Sudanese people live on less than $1 per day. We know that more than 10% of children do not make it to their fifth birthday and three-quarters of adults cannot read or write. We know that over the long battle of war, two million lives have been lost and so far this year, more than 2300 people have been killed in ethnic and rebel violence. A 15 year-old girl has a higher chance of dying in childbirth than finishing primary school.

South Sudan is the world’s newest country and Africa’s 54th state. There are 350 kilometres of made roads in a land as big as New South Wales. It is rich in oil reserves, but will need to rely on piping through the Sudan.

One per cent of households have bank accounts, but there are no credit card processing machines. It will, in the medium term, rely on the support of the UN to assist in the protection of her people and police reforms. It will continue to rely on the developing of relationships with other nations, such as Australia, Canada, the United States of America and Britain, and take its place in the coalition of the states of Africa.

In the euphoria of today, there is a call to patience, because all of these things are South Sudan’s reality and will not change overnight. The risk is always, in such a euphoric moment of time and history that we expect instant change, and opportunity, in newly won independence. In the moment we need now to look to the bigger picture of what the future can be, and that independence doesn’t and mustn’t lead us to an unhealthy and unrealistic, systemic dependence on others, but an openness to listening, to story and reflection; to thinking and visioning to begin to realise the possibilities and opportunities we will see in the potentials of a new beginning.

This begins here and begins with you and me. For tomorrow, the party is over and the call to leadership, cooperation, collaboration and the urgency to address the very basics of infrastructure must be the focus of all of us.

At one level we continue to support the greater needs of the many who are displaced and those who seek the many who are lost and traumatised. To educate and offer opportunities

Sermon at St Paul’s Cathedral, Melbourne on July 10, 2011.
of training, and assisting those whose lives will move from war to peace and new opportunities of education and employment.

At another level, there are those of you who will go back to South Sudan to assist in rebuilding and building a new infrastructure, with the skills and confidence you have gained here and in other countries.

And, thinkers will be gathering to challenge the needed development, reforms and potentials of ‘what might’ and ‘will be’ in a new country – an ancient land. A new integrity, a do-able vision and a determination to do justice to the long journey of fulfilling the dream and reality of independence.

Here in Melbourne, we continue to be challenged by securing settlement, employment and basic language and literacy skills. Whilst many of you are well used to the life you have established here, I know you also worry about the broader perceptions of people who are reported to be concerned about issues of violence amongst your young, and a perceived fear that this might become an epidemic, and mark of the South Sudanese in Australia.

Let me put your minds at rest. There are no reported issues or incidents of violence amongst your young that aren’t prevalent amongst the broader population of young people across Australia both now or historically. Being both a relatively new community, and refugees, there will be a greater focus on your activities than others for the moment. Whilst we need to be concerned for the behaviour and welfare of our children, rest assure this is the real experience of every parent in this nation, and it is not fair that you be singled out. But for the sake of the welfare and safety of our young, be vigilant as I would expect any parent or neighbourhood to be.

Our children need room to grow and to ‘be’, and for some to come to terms with the opportunities of the new world in which they find themselves. They are faced with the bigger challenges of competition between peers and work, a growing materialism which is largely unsupportable, and changing values in the compass of the past which is of little consequence in the reality of now.

They need our listening and support and most of all, for you to love them!

We believe that every person holds in their hearts the same mainstream aspirations as anybody else; a decent home and job, a sense of community and neighbourhood and the same opportunities as anybody else. As refugees, you are Australian citizens finding your way in a new world and what you bind here – your labour, achievements, learning and struggles, will surely be the measure of your resilience, faith and the building of the important relationships you form now and into the future.

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The Gospel today gives us a great clue. Jesus helps us to make the great leap in faith, that from the servant, we become friends, free to work together, to contribute and to build up a nation so that we may bear fruit, fruit that will last.

The invitation is complete, that we “love one another as I have loved you”, and that we lay down those things we believe are solely ours or we unreasonably expect to come without our own labour and effort. We enter into a new way of being, of relationship, of binding that which is good and lasting for our future here as well as the future for your homeland.

The role of the Diaspora is vital in modelling sound thinking and policy here, and keen listening and assistance for those who will build a new nation in the South Sudan. Each of us is responsible for this high calling and loving action.

In faith, let us remember with confidence; ‘if God is for us, who can be against us?’. God bless South Sudan, the Diaspora and each one of you today in this moment of time and history, in the euphoria of the moment, the weight of the journey of the past and in the light of hope for the future.

God bless you
Hallelujah

Amen