

Homily by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba - Memorial Service for Suzanne Peterson

Preached at an online service on January 8 in thanksgiving for the life of the Rev. Canon Sally Suzanne Peterson, formerly of the Diocese of Grahamstown and of the Archbishop's office at Bishops court, Cape Town:

May I speak in the name of God who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

I have, dear friends, been thinking a great deal about Suzanne over these past days, thinking of her with deep gratitude. In my heart I have heard again those deeply poignant words of the Hebrew proverb: 'Say not in grief, she is no more, but in thankfulness that she was.' Indeed we say in thankfulness that she was and that she continues to be with us, not only in the great cloud of witnesses but also in the wonderful legacy she has left behind. Our sense today is one of great gratitude. The Rhineland mystic, Meister Eckard, says that if the only prayer we ever pray is, 'thank you', it would be sufficient. I hope that our simple thank you is sufficient a prayer of gratitude.

How deeply appropriate too that we hear at this liturgy the words from the Book of Revelation, those words that begin v.3. 'I heard a loud voice speaking....' In a very beautiful way, those opening words frame Suzanne's life. She heard even as a young person that loud voice speaking to her heart and calling her to discipleship.

She heard the loud voice, in prophetic tones, calling her to the priesthood at a time when that was an arduous journey for a woman and had to be responded to with a stout heart. She heard the loud voice in local pastoral situations calling her to find in her heart the depths of the priesthood expressed in a million different and random acts of kindness.

There she learnt the truth of the words of St Theresa of Avila that every priest soon learns, that 'Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.' We know that her priesthood took her to all parts of the world and into all the byways of people's hearts.

She heard the loud voice speaking from the vast continent of South and Central America and associated herself with the struggles for justice and the work of building peace in those unjust situations.

She heard a loud voice speaking from South Africa and spent several challenging years here listening to God speak in the vortex of human wrong, exploitation and injustice which we were enduring. In negotiating new territory, and helping us sustain hope for the realisation of our dreams, she showed us in South Africa the best side of America and Americans – a stark contrast to the 'other' side of America

and Americans which has sadly been on display to the world during this past week. She sought to apply in South Africa the wisdom of Eleanor Roosevelt's insight that 'The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.'

As we worked to cast off the yoke of apartheid, she continued to hear a loud voice reminding her to commit to the margins, to those who after a lifetime of suffering were being doomed to be left behind in the new South Africa; those who would remain poor and marginalised. She heard the voice of women trapped in violence and sought through strategic advocacy to bring to the fore the plight of those who suffered from that crime against humanity.

She heard the voices of other Christians and soon was deeply committed to seeking justice with activists and campaigners at the cutting edge of advocacy, especially those in the churches. Very soon she made great friendships within the ecumenical movement and in strong inter-faith witness. She had a special bond with the Roman Catholic Church's Parliamentary Liaison Office and was a trusted friend, advisor and companion to that office and the witness of the churches in that domain. Indeed on the very day she died, we heard also of the death of the mother of her dear friend in those circles, a regular dinner companion, Fr Peter-John Pearson. It is fitting that two people from across so many divides, differing in multiple ways, would have found their way together into heaven, a sign of Suzanne's capacity to hold many diverse people in her heart.

John says of Jesus at the washing of the feet, that he took off his outer garments and washed the disciples' feet. In an extraordinary way, Suzanne did likewise. As she heard the loud voice calling and faithfully responded, she divested herself of her outer garments – the outer garments of her cultural biases, of a more privileged background and education, the outer garments of racial privilege and of clericalism, so as to serve the people she encountered with greater solidarity and humility. This is perhaps her greatest witness, that she knew the truth of Gandhi's maxim that 'The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.' She leaves a great example and a deep challenge to all of us to serve with purity of heart.

Suzanne's life is echoed in the Beatitudes which we have just heard, and in particular the one which confers a blessing on peace-makers. Our world and the church are full of those who proclaim themselves peace lovers, yet the beatitude blesses especially those who go out of their way to make peace; those who are actively involved in building a peace which is built on justice; those who take up the burning issues of the day and see it as their vocation to make the world a better, more just place. Suzanne provided rich testimony to how to fulfill this beatitude.

But her witness was also powerful in that her peace-making took root in her inner, spiritual life. She was able to reach inside herself to find that still point in a busily turning world that allows us to draw from our inner lives, from our spiritual resources, in order that our public witness should flow integrally from a God-centred inner space. Her prayer life shaped her.

Between meetings, it was commonplace to find Suzanne in the chapel at Bishops court, sitting quietly, steeped in prayer. It was a prayer life dominated not by a search for answers but by her desire to encounter God. The peacemaker within guided the peacemaker in the world. But her peace-making also sought to ensure that our shared spaces were places where right relationships prevailed, where old animosities, old divisions were brought to be reconciled and healed, making the church stronger because we were more united. All three dimensions of the beatitudes fully engaged Suzanne, defined her ministries and gave her a sense of purpose.

Now she is at rest. We hear the words of William Penn and affirm that the one who lives to live forever, never fears dying. We also know, in the words of the Dominican friar, Father Bede Jarrett, that just as God lost nothing of her in giving her to us, so we lose nothing of her in giving her back to God, for God never takes back what God has given. We are comforted by the memories she made with us, sustained at this time by the consoling power of the Spirit and the certainty that she is with the God whom she served so faithfully.

Amen.