

## Chairman's Address to the inaugural GAFCON Bishops Training Institute Conference

KEEP LOOKING UNTO JESUS (Hebrews 12:2)

My dear brothers,

Greetings in Jesus' name. As Chairman of GAFCON, I am delighted to have this opportunity to address you on the occasion of our first Bishops Training Conference. I am sure this will be the first of many and that by God's grace it will have a transformative effect on our beloved communion.

Bishops are intended to be shepherds who tend and guard the flock of God. To do this we must look to the example of Jesus himself, the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. As we are reminded in the book of Hebrews (12:2) it is vital that we keep 'looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith'. So we must be focused on Jesus Christ and reflect him in every aspect of our ministry (preaching, teaching, writing and daily living) so that our churches will thrive. Putting aside all worldly temptations, let it be our great ambition to be shepherds who lead flocks that are healthy, growing and secure from attack.

When bishops take their eyes off Jesus, great damage is done to the Church. The troubles of our Anglican Communion have been caused by bishops who not only failed to care for the flock, but actually led their people into error and apostasy. This was the reason why the Nigerian bishops, along with many others, decided not to attend the Lambeth Conference in 2008. We could not pretend to be in fellowship with those TEC bishops who were so outrageously flouting the law of God by consecrating as a bishop a practicing homosexual. Instead we were at the first GAFCON in Jerusalem which marked the beginning of a growing movement of revival and reform in which we now share.

So what does it mean for us to keep 'looking unto Jesus'? The context here in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Hebrews is that of running a race, something we know our Kenya brothers and sisters are famous for! In this race there are three things necessary if we are going to keep our focus on Jesus and not drop out.

1. **We need perspective.** In the race we run, a vast crowd of unseen spectators cheer us on. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (v1), those the previous chapter (11) records who from the beginning of biblical history have walked by faith and trusted the promises of God. They saw great suffering and they saw great victories, but now in Jesus the true hope for which they lived and died has been finally revealed. Brothers, we must not be dazzled by the things which are immediate, but keep focused on the unfolding purpose of God in history to reconcile the world to himself through the shed blood of Christ.

In our work there are many distractions. Some will want us to be statesmen and politicians, others will want us to throw our energies into being fund raisers, social reformers and champions for human rights and economic empowerment. We certainly need committed Christians in these areas and we should give them as much encouragement as we can, but let us never confuse the gospel itself with the fruit of the gospel.

When the gospel is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, people are transformed and society is transformed. These are fruits of the gospel, but these social transformations are not the gospel itself. Our business first and foremost is to preach Christ crucified and the gospel of God's grace so that men and women may be rescued from the power of death and hell and brought into the kingdom of heaven.

So how do these great cloud of witnesses encourage us? Is it merely an abstract idea? No, we can hear them speak as we read and teach the Bible which records their witness. We must make sure that we never stop teaching the Bible and being taught ourselves by the Bible because it is there that we hear their testimony and read the stories of their lives. If our dioceses and we are going to keep looking unto Jesus, we must make bible teaching and preaching central to our ministries. This is the way God speaks to us and keeps us aligned with his great purposes. If we neglect the Word, we will stray and decline.

What a privilege to be those who are entrusted with the proclamation of the gospel and the care of God's people in these last times as we await the revealing of our Lord Jesus in power and glory. We are to seek the lost and to care for the flock, to be workmen who are not ashamed of the gospel and will not be ashamed at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

2. **We need perseverance.** To look to Jesus is also to run with endurance (v1). Your ministry as bishops is a marathon, not a 100-metre sprint and there will be times when you are strongly tempted to quit or to take short cuts to win the applause of the world. These temptations will come, but we are shown how to deal with them and keep going. We are to 'lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely' (v1). This is not easy. We are warned that these things cling closely. They wrap around us to weigh us down and make movement difficult. We need to be free to run the race and there are two different things to be removed.

Firstly, there are weights. These are not sins as such, but the extra baggage we pick up which is unnecessary. It is not for me to be specific about these things, but it means that the test of any activity is whether or not it will help you run the race and fulfill your calling. If it does not, it is a weight. For example, as bishops we are often expected to be present in a ceremonial role at social and civic events. Because we have status, people will want to make use of us to boost their standing and promote their projects and we

need wisdom to know if these are opportunities to speak the gospel or simply a flattering distraction.

Secondly, there are sins. My brothers, these also cling closely and we must be ruthless. For instance, if a bishop is revealed as an adulterer, a drunkard or lacking integrity in financial management, great harm is done to the church and to the gospel, but these public sins will have begun as private sins long before. There are also sins which are not so publicly shameful, but equally damaging to the gospel. Because of our status in society, we are particularly vulnerable to the love of money and the luxury it can buy. We need to be properly equipped to do our work, but no Christian, and especially not a bishop, should be known for aspiring to a luxurious lifestyle. Our lives should be models to the Christians of what a godly household should look like, living lives of wholesome simplicity and generosity.

3. **We need purpose.** We run this race for a prize. We are 'looking unto Jesus' in order to please him, to imitate him, to reign with him in the heavenly Jerusalem and above all simply because we want the precious name of Jesus to be glorified. Our 'looking unto Jesus' is therefore constant and without distraction. It is undivided and the great challenge our Anglican Communion faces today is that there are those who want to distract our gaze and divide our hearts....and divided hearts lead to a divided church.

Homosexuality has been the presenting problem since the Lambeth Conference of 1998 and the passing of Resolution I.10 which reaffirmed the historic and biblical teaching about marriage and sexuality. Since that defeat, the Episcopal Church of the United States has systematically worked to undermine biblical teaching and last year even changed its official doctrine, the Marriage Canon, to permit so called same sex marriage. It has now been joined by the Anglican Church of Canada and the Scottish Episcopal Church and we can expect others to follow. This is not however simply a matter of sexual ethics. It is a programme which completely changes the Christian faith from Christ-centred revealed truth to man-centred religiosity inspired by the spirit of the age.

We are called to fix our eyes on the one who endured the cross, but this revisionist Anglicanism really has no place for the cross because men and women no longer need salvation from sin, death and hell. Jesus is not the author and perfecter of our faith, but merely a great teacher who can be made use of by us as the authors of a new faith to fit the prevailing cultural fashions of the day. Most of us are bishops in provinces of the global south and this should matter to us very much, not simply as a form of ideological colonialism from the West, but because it is a profound subversion of the gospel. As we stated in the GAFCON Jerusalem Statement and Declaration of 2008, the Anglican Communion is 'divided and distracted. The Global Anglican Future Conference emerged in response to a crisis within the Anglican Communion, a crisis involving... the acceptance and promotion within the provinces of the Anglican Communion of a different gospel (cf. Galatians 1:6-8) which is contrary to the apostolic gospel'.

Since 2008, it has become clear that the particular danger we face is not so much from those who are outright false teachers, but the division and distraction which comes when those who claim to be orthodox want us to be in 'shared conversations' and meet for 'Continued Indaba' with those who are teaching a false gospel and turning the teaching of the Bible on marriage upside down by consecrating behaviour which is in revolt against God's design.

To participate in such meetings, which for bishops includes the annual 'Bishops in Dialogue' meetings funded by TEC, means to accept false teachers as being in good standing. These people do not necessarily want us to agree with them, but they do want us to accept them as being fully Anglican. This is a compromise we can never make, because it makes the biblical gospel a matter of choice rather than a truth to be held and required of all. It destroys the discipline of the Church and confuses its witness.

As you face different challenges in your different national contexts, may I encourage you to focus intently on Jesus as taking your eyes off him will lead disastrously to sinking like Peter. This is the only source of strength and the strategy to remain 'faithful unto death'.

So I hope you can see why it is so important that the GAFCON movement supports the bishops of the Communion at this critical time and a rich time of fellowship, learning and prayer lies ahead. Good shepherds who are looking to Jesus will not stand idle while there are lost sheep to be sought out or while the flock is being attacked and scattered. May the Lord use you mightily to unite, restore and grow his Church at this perilous time.

The Most Revd Nicholas D. Okoh  
Archbishop, Metropolitan and Primate of All Nigeria and Chairman, the GAFCON Primates  
Council