

Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent 2024

The Priest Pastor

(please note, this sermon accompanied a number of slides to illustrate Mthr Katy's visit to Tanzania. For reasons of space only a few are included here, but she is very happy to share the others with anyone. Just email priestpastor@stmarylebone.org

Bwana Asifiwere! Praise the Lord! Amina! Amen!

This is how most conversations and introductions among Christians begin in Tanzania: and the phrase is used frequently during conversations and sermons.

It is good to be back at St Marylebone and I bring you greetings from our brothers and sisters from our link diocese of Kagera where I have been for 2 weeks.

Today is the beginning of Lent and we have just heard St Mark's gospel – the no frills version of Jesus's 40 days in the desert.

This new season in the church's year is a serious call to us dear friends.

A call to reboot and review. Because our Christian life can get rather like a laptop that needs attention. Running slow, bugs, failing memory, random messages appearing. Our discipleship can become dulled, it can become subject to negative influences, become low down on our list of priorities.

With a laptop, like so many machines, switching it off and on again can be very effective. And Lent gives us that opportunity: to switch on again. Pope Francis says this of Lent: let us find concrete ways to overcome our indifference. The call to every Christian is to Pray, Fast and Give. Let us attend to the Lord this Lent to show us which ways we can attend to this call.

Today we launch our Lent Appeal for Murganza Hospital and I would like to share with you some highlights of my visit to Kagera, Tanzania. You may remember that our global church partnership with Kagera began in 2021 and last year we welcomed Canon Amon Jackson to Marylebone.

Tanzania is a beautiful country – I only saw a little of the North West bit of it near the border with Rwanda and Burundi. And it is surprisingly green. But that is where the similarity with the UK ends. The life expectancy is 63; 64% of the population are under 25.

The people love to dance – we were welcomed when we arrived by energetic and joyful dancing by local Christians and this is a key part of the liturgy of the Anglican church in Tanzania. Because Kagera is a farming community, the diet is surprisingly healthy as everything is made from scratch. Many women work as house servants; this is Rose and Naomi who looked after our party

and made us fresh juice made from pineapple, ginger, avocado and passion fruit. Our house was very basic, concrete floors washed by hand, clothes hand washed for us, intermittent electricity and hot water.

Church life in Kagera is almost the opposite to this country; the churches are growing fast numerically and the buildings are insufficient and are full to bursting.

This was very difficult during Covid and the Diocese of Kagera are attempting to build a new cathedral to fit their congregation so that their large and growing young church can occupy the old cathedral building, and the new one can host ordinations and Synods and have room for other meetings. So far the cost of this building has mainly been raised by parishioners but it is a big ask for people who are subsistence farmers.

Considering that people who are extremely poor, the people are full of joy and love, and they greatly enjoy having visitors.

These children are from Ngara Anglican Primary School.

They don't have much in the way of computers or school resources and many of them live in dormitories at school. But these are the lucky ones. Along the roadside you see tiny little children in rags often carrying heavy bundles. In a special school nearby children with special needs sleep four to a bed, on rotten strips of foam rubber. Many of them have been abandoned by their parents.

Murgwanza Hospital, with a strongly Christian foundation, but open to all faiths, originated in 1932 as a dispensary established by CMS missionaries.

It supports 400,000 people, and trains nurses and social workers on site.

Half the villages of the local area don't have any dispensaries and so have to travel to the hospital on foot or on motorbike.

The hospital provides a number of services at the hospital and in the community with highly dedicated staff and they are particularly hoping to:

Provide tanks for harvesting rainwater

Recycling water

Provide a dialysis machine, the nearest one being 250 miles away.

Install solar panels to provide affordable energy

Improve the labour suite

Install an incinerator for the safe disposal of body parts

Provide an ambulance

The new medical director is a dynamic, visionary person who has both a short and long term strategy and faith

that the hospital can develop into a regional hospital with greatly improved facilities but poverty is severe in Tanzania and they are hoping for partnership in their development. The hospital would be very grateful for any support we could give this Lent. Dr Mufuru has particularly asked for our prayers.

One of the main reasons I went on this trip was to do some teaching at Kagera Christian Training College with some young men training for ordination.

They will be what are described in Kagera as Pastors, and there are also lay workers being trained called evangelists. We shared together thoughts about Wholeness and Healing in the Christian tradition, Mental Health and Safeguarding, the latter delivered by a colleague from the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich. The students were very receptive and engaged; life will be difficult for them however; pastors are given a very basic house and a plot of land. The Diocese equips them with some avocado plants to eat and to sell, and some eucalyptus trees to give shade to other crops, to mitigate the effects of climate change. They receive some agricultural training. There are offerings from the congregation, but otherwise no salary or pension.

There are unscrupulous self styled Faith Healers and Traditional Healers in many parts of Africa who charge large sums to promise healings to desperate people – a very fruitful discussion was had with the students about theology, ethics and good practice in the Christian healing ministry. The Diocese of Kagera does not yet ordain women but there are some female evangelists who I met for a discussion. When I asked them, hesitantly, whether they felt that they might be called to be Pastors should the policy change they replied without missing a beat 'We are ready'.

You may remember from the last Lent Appeal that the Theological College funds itself through subsistence farming and we supported them when the maize harvest failed. They have added to their income generating projects, pigs!.

Pray, fast, give. I was very struck by the seriousness with which church congregations give in Tanzania and the unique way in which some of them do this.

Many tithe from the small amount of cash they have, other subsistence farmers bring items they have grown. These are auctioned at the end of the service to raise money for the collection – you will see a man has brought a piece of sugar cane. Someone else brought one egg. At this service, I had the honour of preaching, and at the auction, some people bid for some of the items for the preacher and it was a great compliment to be presented with a paw paw and some fruits that were a bit like pomegranates. People will often bid for items for other people in need. Gifts that represent more than the sum of their parts.

Some of you will remember Canon Amon Jackson who visited us last year. He now has been promoted to Diocesan Secretary responsible for the finances and the management of the Diocese of Kagera.

It is a Diocese that seeks to bring fullness of life to people with very little of this world's goods, but whose faith is immediate and visceral, who pray, worship, give and who love God.

I hope that this little presentation has given you a flavour of our link Diocese and why we are supporting them.

So I wish you a blessed Lent. I pray that we will all find ways to reboot our faith; to build in prayer, fasting and giving. That we will challenge within ourselves what Pope Francis describes as the 'globalisation of indifference'.

There is so much need within this broken world, but rather than feel overwhelmed by it, let us bring our prayers as a community and the offering that we can give, lovingly and sacrificially like that small offering of fruit.

A prayer to finish with

Lord God, with Lent we approach the springtime of the year when the face of the earth is renewed and life emerges out of death. We pray that this season of Lent may be a veritable springtime for our souls, so that our lives, quickened by the breath of the Spirit and warmed by the sunshine of your love, may bear abundant fruit and be made radiant with the beauty of holiness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Please support our Lent Appeal to support Murgwanza hospital: you will find the giving details on our website under Kagera Lent Appeal and there are some QR codes on our bulletins and on Portico.





