

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Patronal Festival and Dedication Service
All Saints Church, Plumstead
2 November 2008

Jer 31:31-34
Ps 15-
Rev 7:2-4
Mt 5:1-12

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ – Lord, bless us with pure hearts today, so that we might see you – see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly. Amen.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, dear Saints of All Saints, Plumstead, thank you for inviting me to join you at this splendid service, to mark your dedication festival!

Do you ever think of yourself as a saint, I wonder? And do you ever think of those around you as saints?

Perhaps there is someone we know who puts up with a particularly difficult and unreasonable relative, or long illness, or disability, or burdensome circumstance – and we say ‘Oh, they’re such a saint!’

But that is not really what I am talking about here.

Do you think of yourself as one of the Holy Ones of God – for that is what the Greek of the New Testament means when it talks of the Saints – the Holy Ones.

When you looked in the mirror this morning, as you brushed your teeth, did you see a Holy One?

Did you see Holy Ones around the breakfast table?

Look around you now – who can you see? Well, we may not be as many as the countless multitude of the book of Revelation, but there are certainly a very large number of saints here!

Becoming a saint is like getting to heaven – it does not depend on how good we are.

In fact, it hardly depends on us at all!

All that matters is that we say yes to God – for if we say yes to his love, he transfers us from ‘the dominion of darkness to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins’ as St Paul writes to the Colossians.

To be transferred to the kingdom of the Son of God, means to become a citizen of his kingdom, a citizen of heaven.

And the mark of our citizenship is that we are saints. It is as if we get a new passport that, instead of Mr or Miss or Mrs, says Saint - Saint John, Saint Vicky, Saint Thelma, Saint ... Saint Wrongcliffe, Saint Thabo.

We are ALL Saints!

If you doubt this, look at how St Paul begins so many of his letters.

‘To the saints, [that is, to the holy ones], who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus’ he writes;

or: ‘To all the saints in Christ Jesus – the holy ones in Christ Jesus – who are in Philippi, with all the bishops and deacons’

(Do you see! The bishops and clergy are not the people St Paul thinks of first, when he thinks of saints, the holy ones of God!)

and he writes: ‘To the Church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia ...’

I don’t think St Paul checked out the behaviour and attitudes of every person in each congregation before he started writing!

Saints is who we all are.

To be a saint is to be the beloved of God, and to belong to God.

When we become Christians, God’s Holy Spirit comes to live within us.

Then God looks at us and counts us as holy.

And he goes on to call us to be holy - expecting his holiness to overflow in ways that make a difference to our lives.

This is why he writes in his first letter to the Corinthians

‘to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified [which means, those who are made holy] in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,’

First he makes us holy, and then wants us to live lives of holiness.

What does it mean to live holy lives?

In a nutshell, it means that in the way we live we will increasingly reflect the characteristics of God, which we see most clearly in Jesus Christ, in the gospel he preached, and in the kingdom he proclaimed.

This would include knowing the blessings that come to those who are poor in spirit; who mourn; the meek; who hunger and thirst for righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; the peacemakers; and those who are prepared to risk persecution for righteousness’ sake.

And it would also include living with love and compassion; healing and wholeness; forgiveness and reconciliation; joy and peace; truth and justice and mercy; the coming of freedom where there has been oppression; the dawning of sight, of insight, in areas of blindness and ignorance.

And it is not just that we should speak about these broad concepts, these sweeping visions – we should know and experience their reality in our own lives.

We should find their tangible effects on the details of our daily living.

And we should be channels so that others too can experience God’s love, transforming their lives wherever they need his tender touch.

This is what it means to do what I like to call ‘service delivery’ of the gospel, of God’s promises to us, of God’s call to holiness.

Those of you who were at the Diocesan Family Day we held at Bishops at the end of September will have heard me speak about this already.

But let me explain again what I mean.

In the past, life within South Africa was dominated by one big issue – and, similarly, the life of the Church focussed heavily on ending apartheid.

In this, we were led by a man of great vision, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The Arch, in many ways like Nelson Mandela, had (and still has) the gift of expressing profound truths with great simplicity.

He gave us a vision of hope for a new life transformed through God's promises of new beginnings and past transfigured; of reconciliation, of healing and wholeness.

But turning vision into reality doesn't just happen. We were blessed that Archbishop Desmond was followed by Archbishop Njongo. He was nicknamed 'Canon Bureaucrat' because of his abiding desire to ensure that the Church was shaped and structured in the most appropriate way to live out the life of our calling. He was exactly the successor we needed to build the bridge from vision to reality.

South Africa at the political level, also found its visionary replaced by a technocrat. But now South Africa is faced with the sad reality that it is failing on service delivery. The vision of a better life for all is not being delivered through the new structures, in ways that make a tangible, sustainable, lasting difference to the life of people on the ground.

The Church faces the same stark challenge. We too must ask, are we doing 'service delivery' – service delivery of the gospel?

Are we helping people to know the promises of God, not only in theory, but in the depths of their being?

This question burns in my heart. I know that God has called me to be a pastor, and to help people find their own relationship with God, and to grow in that relationship with God.

My conviction is that though God gives us great sweeping images of what his gospel can mean, he makes it tangible within the lives of individuals.

The heart of the incarnation is that we should each have that personal encounter with the God who redeems and transforms.

Thus, service delivery of the gospel means making it possible for those who were battered and broken by the past, who still bear its scars in their soul, to find their lives touched with Jesus' healing hand.

Delivering the gospel means those who lost their peace, encountering the one who is the Prince of Peace.

It means those who are still heavily burdened by experience and memories, hearing the voice of the one who says 'come unto me and rest'.

It means those whose hearts are broken, experiencing the reality of his overwhelming love.

It means good news, in whatever individual way they need it, to those who are searching for integrity and self-respect; to those whose humanity was diminished by our past contextual challenges, or poverty, or stigma, or conflict.

This is what our reading from the prophet Jeremiah is all about – that we should not just know about God, but that we should know the reality of God, and his redemptive love at work in ways that make a difference in our lives – in ways that change our hearts.

And, for today especially, it means living with the knowledge that, yes, I am beloved of God; yes, he has made me a citizen of the kingdom of his Son; yes, his Holy Spirit lives in me; yes, he sees me as his Holy One; yes, he calls me to live as his Saint – someone through whom the character of Jesus shines, just as light shines through the saints in stained glass windows.

Now, perhaps what I have said has given you pause for thought.

What if, in your life, you feel that you have known about God, and the vision of his kingdom – but you haven't felt the service delivery of the gospel in specific ways, in areas in your own life. Or perhaps you just know that you need it *more*.

Well, today, is a dedication service – a time when we dedicate ourselves to God. And our dedication should include our willingness to be open to God, and to receive from him the good things he has in store for us.

So when you come to the altar rail – when you put out your hands, ready to receive the nourishing body and blood of Jesus Christ – also tell Jesus that you are ready to receive from him whatever service delivery of the gospel he wants to do in your life.

As you put out your hands, expect him to fill them, to fill your life.

If you have particular needs, offer them to him in your outstretched hands.

If you need to know the reality of healing for brokenness, the spirit of forgiveness, or reconciliation, of redemption and transformation – wherever you need to know the promises of God made real – just hold out your hands and ask.

And most of all, as you put out your hands, know that God desires to fill them with his love that overflows, with His Spirit that spills over – so that you might know in the very depth of your being, that you are his beloved; you are his Holy One; you are his Saint – and so that others may see you and know God's love made real.

Amen.