

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Good Shepherd Church, Protea Village
Advent Sunday, 30 November 2008

Isaiah 63:16-64:8

Ps 91

1 Cor 1:3-9

Mk 13:32-37

May I speak in the name of the one God, who is faithful, and who has called us into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Dear Brothers and Sisters of Good Shepherd, thank you for your invitation to join you today.

It is a very special privilege to be with you, on the 30th anniversary of the reopening of this Church.

Advent Sunday was a very fitting date for that to happen – the first Sunday of the Church's year.

It is a day of new beginnings and looking forward, not only to Christmas, but to the fulfilment of all God's promises to his people – the coming of his kingdom, in all its glory.

'Be alert' says Jesus to his followers, in our reading from the Gospel of Mark. 'Be alert', for you do not know when the owner of the house will come.

Jesus himself is of course the owner whose coming we anticipate.

At Christmas we remember his coming, two thousand years ago.

But his coming is neither just an ancient event; nor a single day's celebration each year.

As is sometimes said of so many truths of the Bible, it is 'once for all, and more and more, and again and again'.

Once for all Jesus was born in a stable; once for all he died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins; once for all he was raised to new life; once for all he ascended to heaven to prepare a place for us; once for all he will come again.

Once for all, at baptism, we were united into his death and resurrection.

Once for all, as our epistle reading said, we were called by the God who is faithful, into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

It is in this fellowship that we now live. And, in the different circumstances of our unfolding lives, we experience the reality of Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us, again and again, in every new situation.

We also experience the fellowship of Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us, more and more, as we grow closer to him, and find ourselves becoming more like him, seeing the world more and more through his eyes.

Scripture speaks of us increasingly putting on Christ (Rom 13:14), and calls on us to be steadily transformed, through the ongoing renewal of our minds (Rom12:2).

But in all of this, we need to 'be alert'.

We need to keep awake, open to Jesus coming, not only at Christmas: but coming into each new place we find ourselves; into each new chapter that opens before us – as well as into the continuing every-day-ness of our lives.

Day by day, Jesus wants to keep on coming to us, again and again, and more and more – bringing the light to the darkness, bringing new beginnings, bringing redemption of the past, bringing healing and wholeness – throughout the whole of our lives.

In many ways this is what we are celebrating today: God with us, in every circumstance, bringing the light of his hope and the promise of abundant life, even through the darkest times.

There is no doubt that the people of Protea Village have known some very dark times.

With the Group Areas Act, the whole community was uprooted. Buildings were destroyed. The church was closed.

But that was not the end of the story.

Jenny and Eileen have been telling us about the next chapter. Thank you, Jenny. Thank you, Eileen.

And of course, the story goes on – as the process of land restitution continues.

More than that, new chapters open up before us – such as the restoration of the church, and new building work.

In our own individual lives too, the story never stops unrolling, until we reach our final breath – or, if you like, until we get to the final page, and find ourselves welcomed into the Happy Ending that Jesus tells us he has gone to prepare for us.

Jesus, who comes to us, once for all, and more and more, and again and again, never stops weaving our past into our present and on into the future.

It is not just that we learn to tell our story – important though that is.

We learn to find a place for Jesus in our story.

And then we come to discover that actually, what really matters, is finding our place in Jesus' story.

And the great themes of Jesus' story are salvation and redemption, of the coming of his kingdom.

It is the story of the defeat of evil and death: of all that crushes us, and oppresses us, and burdens us, and weighs us down. And it is the story of the victory of freedom, of abundant life, of healing and wholeness.

And as we let Jesus come to us, again and again, more and more, we find that the story of our lives becomes woven into this story of his.

Griefs of the past gradually become threaded with redemption.

Old wounds become bound up with his ties of love.

Gradually, gradually, we see that even in the greatest darkness, the one who comes once for all *was there all along*.

We may not have seen him at the time – it may have taken a long time to recognise him, and to grasp how he fulfilled his promise, of which St Paul wrote in our Epistle reading, to 'keep us strong to the end'.

Even now we may still be chasing his elusive shadow through the dark clouds of our memories, still trying to grasp hold of him.

But we dare to believe he was present – and has stayed present, and will remain present – and that he will indeed 'keep us strong'. We dare to believe, that, as the prophet Joel promises, he will one day redeem our locust years.

Sometimes that redemption comes by small steps, sometimes by great leaps forward.

I hope that today may be at least a small step for many of you and in a small way, a coming home to the place of healing and love that God has in his heart for you.

In contrast, sometimes redemption breaks in on our understanding like a sudden light dawning in our hearts and minds, or like a huge penny dropping, and we recognise his presence with us in a new way.

But what matters is that we can 'be alert' so whether in small ways or in large, we recognise Jesus coming to us.

How do we 'be alert'?

Well, the answer is the same as the cultivation of an 'attitude of gratitude' of which I wrote in my letter 'to the Laos' earlier this month. If you have not already seen it, copies are available at the back of church.

In essence, what we need is a regular habit of listening out for God; of taking time to reflect on where we have encountered him in the small details of our lives as well as in great events such as the ending of apartheid. We need to teach ourselves to keep our eyes open to see his finger-prints on every aspect of our lives.

It is one of the most powerful ways I know of learning to recognise God's presence, and God's promptings, in our lives, and so, in response to these, learning to walk more closely with him.

One way of doing this, is by setting aside a few minutes each day, and asking God to bring to your awareness those things for which you are most grateful.

Here at Good Shepherd Church today, we have so much to be grateful for – so much that God has made possible, despite all that has been faced.

We thank God for the peaceful coming of democracy – in many ways, to use the words of Isaiah, an 'awesome thing that we did not expect'.

We thank God for all that has happened since then – even as we acknowledge that there is still so much more to be done.

We thank God for the reopening of this church.

We thank God for the close and loving fellowship that has developed in this congregation.

We thank God for all the work that has been done together, in pursuit of financial compensation and the restitution of land.

We thank God for the healing and wholeness that he is gradually bringing in the lives of those who were treated so terribly.

We thank God that he keeps us strong to the end, as St Paul wrote; – that he is the potter who never stops shaping and reshaping us, as Isaiah wrote – so that even if we are not yet at the same point as Eileen and Jenny, we can hope to find freedom from pain and bitterness.

We thank God for this Church's membership of the Community of the Cross of Nails – by which we affirm that Jesus is alongside those who suffer, in their

sufferings, and in the memory of their sufferings; and yet is also the Lord who reconciles.

We thank God that by the cross Jesus brings forgiveness to those who have done wrong – and to those who have found themselves in the wrong, and on the wrong side.

We thank God that this congregation can be a beacon of hope to others, proclaiming that we are not helpless victims of our pasts and its divisions.

We thank God for the new restoration and building project, and that we can look to the future with optimism.

We thank God for Revd Dr Paula MacKenzie's 7 years of ministry here. Paula, we ask God's blessing on all that lies ahead for you.

And I hope that, by the end of the day, we will be able to thank God for a glorious picnic too!

When you take time, later today – as I hope you will – to sit down and talk with God about all that you are grateful for; I pray that in quiet listening, you may also become aware of his more personal touch on your life. Perhaps there are very particular areas where what I have been speaking about means something very specific and personal to you.

It is these, more than anything else, to which we need to become attuned, if we are to be alert to Christ's coming in our lives.

For me, it can mean the impact a specific verse has, speaking directly into some circumstance with which I am dealing. Perhaps some apparent coincidence has made my life easier, or solved some problem. Perhaps a chance encounter, or some little thing that somebody has said or done, has affected me in a greater way than they realised – and I can see God's redemptive hand at work in it.

By taking time to recall such moments, and thank God for them, I am drawn to recognise God's care, God's love, at work in my life in ways I did not always notice at the time.

I am now finding this meditative process is helping me become more alert to his presence actually in each present moment – and, I hope, to respond as he would have me do.

It is a way of finding my place – of all of us finding our own place – in Jesus' story.

It is a way of being drawn into the ever closer fellowship which Jesus Christ our Lord, of which St Paul writes.

It is a way of learning to see God's faithfulness at work in our lives, and being able to recognise that he keeps us strong to the end.

So let us thank God today, for all that he has done; and for all that he has still to do.

'To him be glory in his church, and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever, Amen!' (Eph 3:21)