

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Christ the King, Sophiatown
7 December 2008

Isaiah 40:1-11

Ps 85:8-13

2 Pet 3:8-15a

Mk 1:1-8

(NIV is used here – and quotations below are therefore taken from this.)

Scripture says, 'Prepare the way of the Lord'

May I speak in the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Dear people of Christ the King, Sophiatown, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is such a joy to be with you today – to be back in this remarkable church, among so many good friends.

Thank you for your invitation to join you, as you begin a year of celebration and thanksgiving – thanksgiving for the founders of this church, for those who contributed land, for those who supported its building; and thanksgiving also for those who reopened the church, and helped it to become the parish that it is today.

We have a lot to be grateful for.

Gratitude should be at the heart of the Christian life.

[I hope you see my monthly letter to the people of the Province, 'to the *Laos*' – and have read, in last month's letter, how important it is to have gratitude at the centre of our lives; and how such gratitude draws us closer to God, and to his love, and to his active presence that guides us and strengthens us in his service.]

Gratitude is our first response to all that God does for us; for all that God gives to us – from the very gift of life itself, to his presence with us, in every situation.

Today we are particularly giving thanks for the way that, despite and through, all the troubles we have faced, he has been faithful to us.

He has seen us through.

He has been a light that shone in the darkness.

And he gave us our founders, and many other faithful people through the years, who held that light, who shone that light, into whatever darkness we faced.

And so, we knew that no matter how bad the situation, God was with us.

At Advent we remember Jesus as 'Emmanuel' – which means, God with us.

So today we celebrate, and give thanks for, those who have helped us to see that God was with us, in every circumstance.

But as well as being a day of thanksgiving, and looking to the past, I hope today can also be a day of looking to the future.

Yes, we pray for a new Rector, to lead this parish (and let me now thank Revd Dr Theo Simpson, Revd Eunice Marubelela and Canon Montjane for all they are doing during the interregnum).

But more than this, we pray that everyone here may become a fresh generation of those who help other people see the light of Christ, who recognise him as their King, and who know that no matter what, God is with them.

This is what John the Baptist does. He points others to Jesus. 'Prepare the way for the Lord' he says, echoing the prophet Isaiah, so that Jesus can come to them, so they can come to Jesus – so they can encounter Jesus for themselves.

This is the central calling of the Church – and the mission to which all God's people are called in baptism – that we should help other people encounter Jesus; and know the fullness of his gospel in their lives.

This means that we should live with love and compassion. Our lives should express God's healing and wholeness; his forgiveness and reconciliation; his joy and peace; his truth and justice and mercy. Our lives should proclaim God's comfort, and tenderness, and the good tidings of which Isaiah spoke. Our lives should speak of God's patience, and his desire that all should find repentance and salvation, and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness, of which St Peter wrote.

And it is not just that we should speak about these broad concepts, these sweeping visions – we should know and experience and express 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.

Let me explain 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.

At the heart of Jesus' incarnation is the message that we should each have a 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.

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.

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 his love – 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, at the beginning of Advent, is a good time for the coming of God in a new or fresh or fuller way.

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 – so that you might know in the very depth of your being, that you are his beloved – and so that others may see you and know God's love made real.

Amen.