

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
St John the Apostle, Whetstone – Parish Eucharist
26 July 2009

Ephesians: 3:14-21
John 6.1-21

May I speak in the name of the one God,

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may I say again what a joy it is to be with you. Thank you for your kind invitation to preach and preside at the Eucharist this morning.

Before I became Archbishop, I must admit that my acquaintance with the world-wide Anglican Communion was fairly limited.

But one of the unexpected delights of becoming Primate has been endless new opportunities to get to know brothers and sisters in Christ from all around the world.

In the last year alone, I have attended the Lambeth Conference in Canterbury, the Primates' Meeting in Egypt, and the Anglican Consultative Council in Jamaica.

There, I have met Anglicans from very different cultures, living in very different circumstances.

Yet everywhere, I found a strong sense of family; a strong sense of joyful belonging together, within our worldwide Communion.

Now, I don't want to down-play the seriousness of the current differences there are between Anglicans, especially in some parts of our world.

But I want to say that when we consider our differences, we must not be so caught up with these problems that we fail to see that the single issue that matters most is our relationship with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Our epistle reading this morning has the most wonderful words, the most wonderful prayer, from the Letter to the Ephesians.

The prayer is this: that Jesus Christ will dwell in our hearts through faith, as we are rooted and grounded in love; and that we may have the power

to comprehend, with all the saints [that is, with all other Christians], what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fulness of God.

Alleluia, and Amen to this!

What holds Christians together, and what holds Anglicans together, is that Jesus Christ dwells in us, and, by his grace, we grow in knowledge and love of him, and come increasingly to be filled with all the fulness of God.

For all of us, our integrity, our authenticity, as Christians is based on Christ alone, and on the quality of our relationship with him.

For Jesus is far more than merely a man who lived 2000 years ago and became a good example for us.

Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the incarnate second person of the Trinity – the ‘Word made flesh’ as St John’s gospel puts it.

Jesus shares in our humanity so that, united with his death and resurrection in baptism, we, by the power of the Spirit, may be ‘in Christ’, and so partake of his divinity – the promise of eternal life at one with him, which we shall know in all its fulness, beyond death.

No one else can do this for us.

Jesus, the crucified, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven – and it is because he lives eternally, that all of us can enjoy the wonders of a living relationship with him.

He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – for us, and for all who throw themselves on the mercy of God, not trusting in their own righteousness.

Only in Jesus do we find the ability to transcend the limitations and failings of humanity.

He alone is the sure and certain hope of forgiveness for all we have done wrong, for all we have failed to do, for falling short, for letting others down, for letting ourselves down.

Jesus is the one to whom we look, not only for forgiveness, but also to bring fresh beginnings, and to do the rescue work of salvation and redemption.

He is the one who promises to transfigure and transform the mediocre and the fallible, into something where the glory of God is revealed, and God's eternal purposes bear fruit that will last into all eternity.

Only in Jesus Christ do we find the redemptive healing of our souls from the pains of a broken and hurting world.

Only in Jesus Christ do we find the wisdom to know how to live transformatively, and the courage and strength to do so.

Only in Christ do we find the ability to love beyond our own capacity to love – and to call down unreserved blessings on those whose lives seem to be most directed against us and all we stand for.

And therefore, when we encounter Christians who are different from ourselves, what matters most of all is whether Jesus is their Lord.

Are they opening their lives to him, so that he can increasingly work his purposes in them?

What is the quality, and trajectory, of their relationship with Jesus?

Perhaps we need to challenge ourselves: are we actually prepared to see and acknowledge, in the words of the epistle reading, Christ dwelling in those with whom we disagree?

We put a lot of store by Christian orthodoxy, and rightly so. For it is certainly not the case that if we claim we love Jesus, then 'anything goes'.

But we should not forget that though we now tend to understand 'orthodoxy' as meaning right belief, in fact it originally means 'right glory' – giving appropriate glory to God.

To be properly orthodox is to live a life that brings honour and praise to God.

It is about being in right relationship with him, rather more than it is about having a correct grasp of theology or doctrine.

The remarkable German protestant theologian Karl Barth – perhaps the greatest theologian of the 20th century – visited the US in 1962, towards the end of his long and distinguished career.

He was asked what encapsulated the heart of his many profound theological books. After a moment's thought he answered 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'

So, as I pray for the Anglican Communion, the heart of my prayers is that all of us, whatever our differences, may grow in knowing Jesus and his love.

Meditation on today's gospel reading can help us consider where we are in our relationship with Jesus, and the direction we are moving in, and where we need to grow.

So now, I want you to sit back, and close your eyes, and relax – and imagine that it is a sunny morning on the mountainside above Lake Tiberias, and you are there, as Jesus speaks to the crowds.

Imagine the scene unfolding:

- the people becoming tired and hungry [pause]
- Jesus asking the disciples what should be done [pause]
- the boy with his loaves and fish [pause]

Where are you in this story of a great multitude encountering Jesus?

In such a large gathering, there must surely have been someone who feels rather like you feel, in your own relationship with Jesus.

Perhaps you feel like one of the crowd.

So – do you feel close to Jesus, or farther away?

Are you keen to get nearer, or are others pushing past and separating you from him?

What is it about him that has drawn you there anyway? What do you seek from him?

Or do you just want to be a detached spectator?

Perhaps, instead, you feel like one of Jesus' disciples.

What might God be trying to tell you through this?

How do you feel about the crowd?

Do you feel yourself sharing in Jesus' compassion. Or perhaps you find yourself resenting their intrusion on the quality time you hoped to have with Jesus, as part of his inner circle!

What messages has the Lord got for you in how you feel here?

Perhaps you feel like Philip – overwhelmed by the task that Jesus is placing before you.

Perhaps you too want to point out the illogicality and unreasonableness of what Jesus is asking you, in your own life.

If so, what might Jesus want to tell you, about his ability to give you the resources you need for the tasks he entrusts to you?

Then there is the small boy. Perhaps you identify with him.

What do you have to bring to Jesus?

Or perhaps there is something he is asking you to offer in his service?

Do you need to hear Jesus' reassurance that, no matter how small your offering, in his hands it can make the most enormous difference?

You might even identify with the loaves and fishes – feeling your life is one of being blessed, broken, and shared out for others!

Yes, if we trust ourselves to his hands, God can use our brokenness to strengthen others.

So where do you find yourself in this story as the food is distributed?

What if you identify with the crowd? Are you ready and able to accept and receive?

Or would you rather say 'Thank you, that's fine for you, but I prefer to do my own thing' and take out your own sandwiches?

If you feel it is Jesus coming towards you, are you ready to respond to his offer of food for the journey of life?

Or would you rather remain anonymous and invisible among the crowd?

Why so? Will Jesus let you?

What has Jesus got to say to you, today?

It seems he has time for every individual in that whole great multitude.

And as we contemplate this story, and later as we come to the altar rail, all of us can ask ourselves 'What does it mean to me, to receive and eat from the hand of Jesus?'

Finally, everyone is fed. But the day has not ended.

'Collect the pieces' says Jesus.

It seems that Jesus wants to tell us that nothing in our lives is truly worthless rubbish.

All that we are, all that we have – even the things that we consider the mess, or the left-overs from our other priorities – can be taken up and used by him.

As St Paul put it in the letter to the Romans, 'in ALL things, God works for good'. It is for us to let him!

And finally, that short post-script with the amazing story of Jesus walking on the water – how he comes to us in our terrors, and says 'do not be afraid'.

So then, dear people of God, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, what shall we learn from today's readings?

What matters is to grow in knowledge and love of Jesus our Lord and Saviour.

We do not know what the future will bring, but with him we need never be afraid.

Jesus may call us to difficult tasks in the service of God's church and of God's world, but he will give us what we need to carry them out.

Wherever we find ourselves, in the journey of life, he wants to feed us and sustain us.

He will give us, not only just enough for our needs, but an overwhelming abundance, more than we can ever ask or imagine.

There is no part of us that he does not want to sweep up, to catch up, in his love.

And most of all, his desire is to become part of us, and to dwell in us, so we might be filled with all the fulness of God.

So let me end by repeating those wonderful words from the Epistle:

Dear people of God of St John's, Whetstone, dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I bow my knees before the Father ... and I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in you inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depths, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fulness of God.

Amen.