

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
“Seniors’ Service” Evensong at Holy Trinity, Kalk Bay
18 October 2009

Ecclus 4:1-10
Psalm 71:1-12
Luke 10:1-12, 17-20 – NRSV

May I speak in the name of God, who writes our names in heaven.

Dear people of Holy Trinity Kalk Bay – dear brothers and sisters in Christ – and, let me also say, since we are celebrating senior citizens today, dear mothers and fathers in Christ!

It is a joy to be with you this evening. Thank you, Father Ronald and wardens, for your invitation.

Let me begin with our reading from the Gospel according to St Luke.

Now, if this were a ‘Juniors’ service, rather than a ‘Seniors’ service, it would be my primary task to exhort you to be ready to be sent out wherever Jesus calls you.

I’d be encouraging you to see life ahead as an adventure, and to be prepared to get up and go, wherever he might lead!

But I guess that many of you have had more than your fair share of adventures; or have travelled a long, long, way on the journey of life up to the present, and now is the time to come home, and take a different role within the community.

That said, I know that so much of the fabric of local society is held together by the dedication of active pensioners – and to speak of ‘seniors’ can mean anything from the hugely active recently retired to those another generation older.

[My own mother, who died last month at the age of 80, certainly kept herself busy until ... doing ...]

So the words from our reading on which I’d like us to focus are those with which the passage ended: ‘Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.’

Jesus had sent out seventy of his followers, armed with only their faith, to preach the kingdom of God, and spread his healing and wholeness.

When they returned, they reported what they have experienced.

'Lord' they said 'in your name even the demons submit to us!'

Jesus replied 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.'

Yet, having said this, and having given them authority over evil, and assured them that nothing can hurt them, he then told them

'Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

The question to us this evening is this: whether we are looking back on some recent episode in our lives, or whether we are reviewing the many years of our past: what is it that matters, as we give an account of ourselves to Jesus?

As with the disciples, 2000 years ago, the tendency remains to focus on what we consider our achievements, our successes, our accomplishments.

It is as if we feel the need to polish up our best CV and present it to Jesus!

And though Jesus acknowledges what the disciples have done, he wants to put the focus somewhere else – on what God has done for us.

What matters most is that we are caught up into God's plan of redemption for all creation.

What matters is, as the Baptism service puts it, that we are those who believe and trust in the Father, who made the world; in his Son, who redeemed humankind; and in his Holy Spirit who gives life to the people of God.

What matters is that we are born again, into God's kingdom, by water and the Spirit, as Jesus told Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to him by night, to try to understand what Jesus meant by preaching God's kingdom.

Being a citizen of God's kingdom, having our names written in heaven, is God's free gift that he offers to us – all we have to do is accept, and say thank you!

Sometimes this is hard for us to do – our pride gets in the way, and we want to be acknowledged as having achieved something significant, and deserving of reward.

But salvation is a free gift, and cannot be earned.

This is of course, the most tremendous relief, if we don't feel we have much in the way of good deeds to commend ourselves!

Jesus reply to us all is the same – God loves us: he loves us first, before we have done anything at all, right or wrong – and it is because he loves us, he calls us to be his children.

And saying yes to this invitation to live in love with him, is the essence of what it is to be a Christian.

It is so sad that there is such a widespread misunderstanding that you have to be good to become a citizen of heaven.

That is entirely back to front – it is being a citizen of heaven that helps us to be good!

This is the light in which we should view passages like that from first reading – from the book of Ecclesiasticus, sometimes called the Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach – a book in the Apocrypha, written in Hebrew about 200 years before the birth of Jesus Christ.

We heard a long list of what it means to be a decent and honest person, a good member of society.

All this is important – just as it was important that the seventy disciples faithfully preached the kingdom, and opposed evil wherever they encountered it.

And Jesus longs to say to us 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

But all of this follows on from the fact that we *are* God's servants, we are Jesus' disciples – we *are already* accepted in his sight, we are already citizens of heaven.

And of course, it is because we are citizens of heaven, with the Spirit dwelling within us, that we are helped to make the right choices, take the right acts, do the right thing, as life unfolds.

Remember, when Jesus summed up the whole of the Old Testament law into two commandments, he did not give us specific rules to follow.

No, he said, 'Live in love God – love him with all your heart and soul and mind and strength; and love your neighbour as yourself.'

It is first and foremost about right relationship, not about right action – how good we are.

Nor is it about right doctrine – though you might not think so from all the arguments Christians have among ourselves sometimes over how to interpret Scripture!

It is about loving God – and then letting him lead and direct us through whatever we face in life.

So, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear mothers and fathers of Holy Trinity Kalk Bay, as you look back on your lives – and as you look back on the 135 years that your Church is celebrating this year – do not become too caught up in what you have done and done well; and do not worry too much about what you have failed to do, or have done wrong.

But rejoice, because you are the precious children of our loving Father in Heaven; because he has written your names in his book of life; because he has made you citizens of heaven; and because one day he will bring you safely home to himself.

And so, rejoice.

Amen.