

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Patronal Festival – All Saints Roodebloom
8 November 2009

[They will be celebrating 'All Saints', even if a week late!]

Jer 31:31-34 – Good News Bible

Rev 7:2-4, 9-12 – Good News Bible

Matthew 5:1-12 – Jerusalem Bible

May I speak in the name of God, who calls us from every race, tribe, nation and language, and writes his law upon our hearts, so we may know him.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear people of God of All Saints Roodebloom, let me say again what a great joy it is to be with you as you celebrate your patronal festival.

As we celebrate the feast of All Saints, I sometimes regret that we do not all speak first century Greek!

For church tradition has often led us to believe that you have to be very special indeed, to be a saint.

And this has even affected the way that we translate our Bibles.

Because, in Greek, nearly every letter, every epistle, of the New Testament, is written to 'the Saints' – the saints in Rome, in Corinth, in Ephesus, in Philippi, in Colossae, and so on.

And when St Paul writes, for example, 'to all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints', he means everyone in the congregation!

Yet sometimes our Bible translators take fright at this, and instead say 'called to be his people' or some such.

But take courage from St Paul!

This is how he begins his first letter to the Corinthians:

To the Church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.

And this is how he starts his second letter:

To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia.

As far as St Paul is concerned, every Christian is a saint!

The Greek word literally means 'holy one', and this conveys the sense of being 'set apart' for the special purposes of God.

What is it that sets us apart in this way?

Well, it is not about our own actions, how holy we manage to be by our own effort.

It is God who sets us apart, in our Baptism!

As it says in the Prayer Book, in Baptism we are united with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit comes upon us to bring us to new birth in the family of God's Church.

We the church join in saying to the newly baptised:

We welcome you into the Lord's family, we are members together of the Body of Christ, we are children of the same heavenly Father, we are inheritors together of the kingdom of God.

Being part of this great company of the baptised is what it is to be a saint!

For it is God who sets us apart, it is God who makes each one of us a saint.

All of us here are saints, whether we like it or not!!

We are part of that enormous, countless crowd, from every conceivable race, tribe, nation and language, of which our second reading spoke.

We belong in heaven – that is our final destination, in the presence of the God of love, who is worthy of all praise and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might, for ever and ever, Amen!

That is what we have to look forward to!

'But, Archbishop' you may say 'that is in the future – I'm not there yet – and I don't feel much like a saint this morning; or even if I might this morning, I'm not sure I still will, by the time I am half way through Monday!'

So what does it mean for us to live as saints now – being, as we all are, fallible human beings?

Well, the good news is that it is down to God far more than it is down to us.

All he needs us to do, is to cooperate with him!

The promise of our first reading, from the book of the Prophet Jeremiah, is for every one of the baptised, for every one of us.

For we are people of the New Covenant – the New Testament (it means the same thing).

And God, in his New Covenant, promises to put his law within us, to write it on our hearts, so that we shall be able to recognise him as our God, and know ourselves to be his people.

And more than this, he will forgive our sins and no longer remember our wrongs.

All we have to do is accept this.

I suppose you could say that all we have to do is become what he has already made us.

All we have to do is be ready to hear his voice within us, to respond to his love, his leading.

For a very few people, that leading may ask great things – and those who say yes to such leading are the ones we often tend to think of as 'true saints'.

But actually, for all of us, it is responding to God in the little things that shows that we truly are his saints.

The Gospel reading, that famous passage, tells us what this means.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit ...'

Every time you are prepared to put others first, to show generous magnanimity, to step back from throwing your weight around, or standing too high on your own dignity – then you are demonstrating what it is truly to be a saint.

‘Blessed are the gentle ...’

Every time you show compassion, express care, act with kindness, go the extra mile - then you are demonstrating what it is truly to be a saint.

‘Blessed are those who mourn ...’

Every time you switch on the TV or radio, or open the paper, and your heart grieves for those who suffer – even those who have made a mess of their own lives; every time you feel like praying ‘Lord have mercy’ on some grim situation; every time you take the bereaved a pot of stew, or you sit with them and let them speak of their loved one at no matter what length - then you are demonstrating what it is truly to be a saint.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness ...’

Every time you sign a petition, or join a march, or recycle your paper and bottles and tins and plastics and press for more recycling facilities; every time you attend a community meeting, or serve on an action group, or work with a parent-teacher association, or organise within your neighbourhood - then you are demonstrating what it is truly to be a saint.

‘Blessed are the merciful ...’

Every time you forgive and allow someone the chance to make a new start; every time you turn the other cheek or go the extra mile, waiting for the penny to drop with someone you love and who keeps wronging you; or, indeed, every time you show tough love when that is the only answer that is going to make a difference - then you are demonstrating what it is truly to be a saint.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart ...’

Every time you refuse to condemn out of hand, but help people to move beyond their mistakes; every time you are prepared to believe good of someone and find that your high expectations draws out the best in them; every time you stand up for truth, honesty, good manners, ethical behaviour - then you are demonstrating what it is truly to be a saint.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers ...’

Every time you act to break the spirals of conflict; every time you refuse to retaliate with interest; every time you help others to see a constructive, not destructive, way forward; every time you are part of the solution, not part of the problem - then you are demonstrating what it is truly to be a saint.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness ...’

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ – our Lord does not promise us that being a saint will be easy. Indeed, often life is hard, very hard indeed.

But God promises us this – no matter what, he is with us, through thick and thin, through good times and bad.

Even if we are the ones who mess up, he promises never to abandon us.

He is always there, with us, no matter how many times we fall – always holding out his hand to help us up, once we are ready to take it; and ready to dust us off, and encourage us to take the next steps following him.

Yes, it is God who makes the difference – his presence with us, and, more than that, shining through us.

When we think of saints, we often think of those we see in stained glass windows [like those here]. Sometimes the glass is very beautiful.

But what really brings them to life is not the glass itself – but the light shining through them.

It is so for us – what makes us special, what turns us visibly into the saints that God has made us to be, is when we allow the light of Christ to shine within us.

Dear people of God of All Saints, Roodebloem – or, as St Paul would surely say, dear saints of All Saints, Roodebloem – may the light of Christ shine in you, and through you, into the community around you.

May you know yourselves blessed – and may you be a blessing to others.

Amen.