

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Confirmation – St Andrew’s Steenberg**  
**6 December 2009**

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Second Sunday in Advent  
Mal 3:1-4  
Phil 1:3-11  
Lk 3:1-6

May I speak in the name of God, who promises to bring to completion the good work he has begun in each of us.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear People of God of St Andrew’s Steenberg, dear confirmation candidates, may I say again what a joy it is to be with you today.

Thank you, Fr Gradwell and wardens, for the invitation. As Bishop of Grahamstown, I used to see Gradwell as a student on a regular basis: I cycled to work while he drove to College in his blue Tazz! It is good to be here in his parish.

And what a marvellous day it is for a confirmation: the Second Sunday in Advent, when we particularly remember St John the Baptist.

St John is the one who cries ‘Prepare the way of the Lord!’

He is the one who points the way to Jesus.

This is also our calling – the calling into which we were baptised; and which we acknowledge as our own, when we come to be confirmed.

We commit ourselves, as the Prayer Book words will shortly remind us, to a life of ‘worship, witness and service’.

All of these, in different ways, are about pointing the way to Jesus.

First of all – worship.

In this, we are pointing *ourselves* towards Jesus!

Worship is the means by which we orient our life towards him: it is:

- how we get to know him;
- how we come to understand him better;
- how we learn more of the sort of life he would like us to lead;
- and how we recognise him being alongside us to help us and encourage us, in this life he asks of us.

At the Last Supper Jesus tells his followers that he calls us his friends (Jn 15:15).

Growing in friendship with Jesus is pretty much the same as with any other friend.

Most of all you hang out together!

This is what we are doing when we come to church – spending time in God’s presence in a very particular way, in our Sunday services.

But we also need to make one-on-one time with him, praying and reading our Bibles on our own.

We can talk to him, and we can listen to him – as we would with any friend.

We can tell him what’s on our mind, the things that worry us, the things we’re afraid of. We can tell him our hopes, and set out our options before him.

And as we learn to feel a growing appreciation of his love for us, so we will also find that we can feel him guiding us in the choices we are faced with in life.

This is what St Paul is talking about, when he writes to the Philippians (as we heard in our second lesson):

‘This is my prayer – that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight, to help you determine what is best.’

So be confident that this is what God wants for you, even though learning to listen to him takes lots of practice.

It often comes best through sitting quietly and mulling over a verse in the Bible, or even just focussing on our breathing, or a candle, or a cross, and asking him to let us feel his loving presence.

Sometimes an answer to our questions just seems to arrive in our consciousness. Sometimes it is later on that we feel a penny dropping, and say to ourselves 'Ahah! *That's* what I needed to know!'

But God gave us two ears and only one mouth, so I often feel that we ought to spend twice as much time listening to God as we do talking to him!

And because Jesus lived the human life just like us, there is nothing that we cannot speak to him about, nothing that he does not understand.

He knows what it is to be a teenager!

He knows what it is like to be unsure whether you are child trapped in an adult's body, or an adult trapped in a child's, with all the confusions of the physical and emotional changes and raging hormones that we experience!

Imagine that! A God who understands what it is like to be a teenager, because he's been there!

And therefore, because Jesus is fully human, we can base our lives on him – turning ourselves to follow him, and the example that he sets.

This is the first way we model ourselves on John the Baptist – pointing to Jesus through our worship.

The second area where we are to point to Jesus, is through our 'Witness'.

Today when we speak about a witness, we almost always mean someone who gives evidence in court.

Well, when Christians speak about being witnesses, this also means giving evidence.

Our lives should give evidence that we are Jesus people – and we should give this evidence not only in words, but also by the way we live our lives.

Our attitudes, our words, our actions, should all be witnesses to Jesus – they should point others to him.

Yet following Jesus, and living according to the standards that God sets for us, can sometimes seem very daunting.

It is as if there were an endless list of ‘thou shalt nots’ which is always going to catch us out.

But the wonderful thing about being a Christian is that God sends his Holy Spirit upon us, to help us live the sort of life he wants.

In a few minutes, I shall lay my hands on you, with the prayer that the Holy Spirit will come upon you in a new way, to help you live this new life to which you commit yourselves.

And this is not just for today – God promises that his Spirit will be with you, fresh and full of life, every day, letting you know he is there, to be with you:

- to help you live your life well;
- to guide you in the choices and decisions you make;
- to give you the courage to say and do the right thing, even when it is difficult or unpopular;
- and to pick you up if you fall – no, *when* you fall, for all of us mess up and go on messing up, throughout our lives.

For God’s promise is, that, if we put our trust in him, if we walk on the journey of life with our hand in his, he will never, never leave us.

St Paul wrote about this too, in today’s lesson, when he says, ‘The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.’

No matter what goes wrong, no matter how often or how badly we mess up, no matter if we ignore him for days or weeks or months or years – he is there, always there, ready to help us back onto our feet the moment we’re ready to receive his help.

And he’ll give us a fresh start, a new beginning; and point us in the right direction; and lead us on the journey ahead; until he finally brings us to our heavenly home. Yes – he will bring his purposes to completion.

This is God’s promise to you who are being confirmed today – and the same promise holds true for everyone here who has been confirmed in the past.

We are witnessing to God, pointing others towards Jesus, whenever we choose to live our lives like this – with our hand in the hand of Jesus, following him, guided by the Spirit.

What speaks loudest to other people is not whether or not we are perfectly good – it is how we deal with the tough things in life, the failures and the setbacks.

It is in letting God's strength support us, encourage us, forgive us, and give us hope to start again and keep on trying, that we most powerfully show what difference God makes to our lives.

The third way we point others to Jesus, as John the Baptist did, is through a life of service.

Jesus said 'I came not to be served, but to serve' and this is why, when we too are prepared to serve others, we demonstrate in practical ways God's love for each one of us – we point others to Jesus' love.

Jesus wants everyone to be able to find him, to come close to him, and to experience his loving and compassionate care.

Of course, in South Africa in the bad old days, often those who were discriminated against were forced to be servants, with no choice in the matter. Being a servant was a bad thing.

But Jesus shows us that freely choosing to serve others, is the way to live a godly life.

Perhaps you will remember what Jesus taught in St Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 25, when he tells the story of separating the sheep from the goats.

He says that whenever you feed the hungry, care for the sick, clothe the naked, give shelter to the homeless – when you show any act of kindness to another human being, then it is as good as if you are doing it for Jesus himself.

This is true for all of us – whether in our own families or work-places or communities, or whether we are politicians and government officials. This is why we often call such officials 'civil servants' – they are there to serve the civil life, the life of citizens, of our country.

Service to others is one of the main ways of, to quote John the Baptist, preparing the way of the Lord, making his path straight and the rough ways smooth.

Service to others – showing the nature of God in demonstrable ways – helps get rid of the barriers that often prevent people coming to Jesus.

So there we are – we are to be like John the Baptist, declaring the way of the Lord, pointing ourselves and others to Jesus, through lives of worship, witness and service.

And yet, I have to say, following Jesus is not always easy.

He sometimes asks difficult things of us. He sometimes tests our commitment to him, and living his way, by his standards. Sometimes he takes us through hard times.

Yet we should not be put off by this. Because actually, it is a sign that he cares for us, and wants to bring out the best in us.

For if you speak to any Christian of long-standing, they will generally tell you that it is through the hard and difficult periods that they have grown most in their faith, and in their understanding that Jesus' love is with them always, no matter what.

This is what Malachi is talking about, when he says that God is like a refiner's fire – and he will sit as a purifier of silver.

Perhaps you know what this means.

To refine silver, the refiner would heat the impure metal in a furnace. As he turns the heat up, the impurities separate out from the pure silver and rise to the surface, where they can be skimmed off. The refiner continues doing this until the silver is pure.

How does the refiner know when the metal is pure – when he can see his face reflected in the mirror of molten silver.

God sometimes turns the heat up on us, too.

But his purpose is the same – so that we become transformed, and reflect him more and more clearly.

So, dear confirmands, this is our prayer: that from this day forward, you will live lives that point to Jesus, and that you will reflect him more and more clearly to the world around.

May it be so! Amen!