

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Midnight Mass, St George's Cathedral
'Mary treasured these words,
and pondered them in her heart'
24 December 2009

Isaiah 9: 2-7
No Psalm - *While shepherds watched...*
Titus 2:11-14
Gradual Hymn *When our God came to earth*
Luke 2:1-20

'Mary treasured these words, and pondered them in her heart'

May I speak in the name of God, the Everlasting Father, whose Eternal Son is born among us – our Saviour and our Prince of Peace – by the power of his Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Deviate: Motivating my daughter today to join us at mid night service, I said. "Pabi, join us, you have not heard this sermon before." She pondered and then asked, "Daddy do you usually use the same sermon everywhere else?" Pabi offered me a gift, a gift out of the mouth of babes, that is, to offer Jesus as gift and not myself – so here, on this theme, is my new sermon for tonight!)

This is my second Christmas in Cape Town, but over the last few days, I've gained an impression that things are quieter this year than last. Fewer crowds, less traffic on the roads, shorter queues in the shops.

May be I've just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Only next year will we know whether retailers, restaurants and hotels have had a so-called 'good' Christmas.

Yet what does it mean, to have a 'good' Christmas? Economists tell us that – provided we steer clear of excessive debt – it is good for the economy, good for unemployment, for us to spend our money. Buying more stuff is, they say, a good thing!

But I can't help wondering if the credit crunch, together with the threat of global climate change, has taught us to be wary of an economic system that operates through an endless cycle of consumption as if the world had infinite resources – something that clearly is not true.

Limitless wealth for all is not something to which we can aspire. Nor can we be content and not outraged by the inequalities in God's plentiful world. Indeed, even a modest middle-class Capetonian lifestyle for all would take pretty much two whole planets to sustain, if on-line quizzes are to be believed.

This brings me to my central question – to what can we rightly aspire in life? What is the treasure that is life's goal – the goal of individuals? the goal of our societies? – not only for ourselves, but for our children, and our children's children?

Tonight I might put that question in other words: What is the present, the gift of greatest value, we would most like to find in our own Christmas stocking? – and in the Christmas stockings of those we love?

'Mary treasured these words, and pondered them in her heart' said our reading from St Luke's Gospel.

The words worth treasuring were these: 'Do not be afraid, for there is good news of great joy for all people: the birth of a Saviour.'

‘Do not be afraid.’ Life is hard – sometimes very hard indeed – but God is bigger, and therefore we should not have to live with fear, in the face of life, nor in the face of death.

Jesus stands with us, and we can put our hands in his. He will be with us, through thick and thin – a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on, a source of strength, a voice of encouragement. This is why we call him Emmanuel – ‘God with us’.

Jesus alone can travel with us that final journey from this life to the next, because he has walked that way before us. So, we never need be afraid.

This is good news – this is joy – this is a Christmas present worth having.

Our other readings told us more about what it means for Jesus to come as our Saviour.

‘The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined’ wrote the prophet Isaiah.

Where is there darkness in this world? Where is there grim depression, despondency, dejection and despair? Where is there woundedness and brokenness, misery and grief?

Jesus – as it says in the famous words of the Gospel according to St John, is the light who shines in every darkness; and no darkness can ever extinguish it.

The prophet Isaiah has more to tell us: the Saviour will establish a realm of endless peace, and uphold it with justice and righteousness. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Where is there no peace? Where is there injustice? Where is there a lack of righteousness – where is there dishonesty, malice, and downright evil?

Jesus will step in – if we invite him, if we make space for him. For he loves us, and is zealous to bring peace, justice, righteousness.

This is what we sung about in our hymn just now – he is the God who comes, righting wrongs.

Yes, Jesus is the source of all hope – real, concrete hope. His zeal will see to that.

No, the darkness of this world cannot win.

Not if we receive the Christmas present who is Jesus.

Not if we take the gift that God offers, and unwrap it and make it our own.

Here comes the challenge – because if we unwrap this gift, we have to do more than put it on a shelf to gather dust as we forget about it.

What Christmas presents will you receive this year? Some gifts are to put on display; some are to wear; some are to use; some are to eat.

Jesus is all of these.

We are to display Jesus' presence in our lives – through our actions, our words, our attitudes.

We are to share Jesus' zeal. This is what St Paul wrote, in our second reading: He gave himself, to purify a people of his own, who are zealous for good deeds.

Therefore, we are to be zealous in displaying Jesus, and all that he stands for: by pursuing justice and righteousness, and bringing light wherever there is darkness, by being agents of healing and hope.

This is what it means to 'put on Christ', says St Paul – like wearing our new Christmas outfit, for all to see.

Because God's gift of himself demands from us some personal transformation. We cannot welcome the Christ child, without allowing him to change us and our society.

Anyone who has had a new baby come into their home will know that life is never the same again!

By the arrival of the Christ-child, God wants to change us, too – so that through us, he can change the world!

Jesus is a gift to be used.

The world around us may not acknowledge him as Saviour, but people everywhere need to know his peace, his justice, his truth, honesty, healing, comfort, encouragement, courage – his hope.

It is our job to communicate Christian values, so God's best may be acknowledged and shared across communities, societies, nations.

It is God's best

- that will help us move beyond Copenhagen globally, and take the next steps locally in preserving our planet;
- that can bring substance to World AIDS Day, which we marked on 1 December, or prompt individuals to set up projects in their own communities, like Beauty, who I met on 1 December, and whose sewing project helps HIV-positive people like herself to support themselves;
- that enables us to do the right thing, ethically, morally – in our communities, our businesses and work-places, our schools and colleges, our personal lives.
- That will move us from outrage to action - when infants die at birth or before the age of five or their mothers die at birth; or when the majority of God's people continue to lack shelter; when Palestine-Israel lacks peace or when countries pass legislation that undermine and demean the sanctity of life.

Finally, I said some Christmas presents are to be eaten.

Jesus says 'feed on me' – feed on my body and blood, given for you, he says.

And so we come, with open hands, to the altar – to be nourished by him, to be strengthened by him, to be sustained by him.

We need Jesus himself, within us, if we are to live the life to which he calls us.

So, tonight, come and receive the greatest gift, the most valuable treasure of all – Jesus himself – and let yourselves be transformed by him, to share his treasure with the world.

Amen.