

Archbishop Dr Thabo Makgoba
Patronal Festival, Holy Trinity, Hazendal
29 August 2010

Is 9:2-7; Acts 4:8-12; Lk 2:15-21 (The readings are those for The Holy Name of Jesus, APB p.290, taken from the Good News Bible)

May I speak in the name of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom God has given to save us.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear people of God of Holy Nativity, Hazendal, may I say again what a joy it is to be with you today as you celebrate your patronal festival.

Thank you, Fr Derrick and Theodosia, thank you wardens, thank you everyone, for your invitation, and your warm welcome.

It is wonderful to come, for a change, to a church that is named, not for a saint, but for Jesus himself – and especially for his birth.

We celebrate it, not in the way that we celebrate Christmas, but rather, we celebrate the fact that:

- the eternal Word of God who was from the beginning (as St John tells us);
- put off the glory of heaven and emptied himself (as St Paul tells the Philippians);
- and put on flesh, becoming a human being (as they both tell us!).

This is the miracle – that God became one of us: he lived like us, he died as all of us will one day die.

I can respect a God like this!

He is not an old man with a long white beard; sitting on a cloud; far, far away; who has no idea what we are going through – and who issues instructions from a safe distance, telling us ‘thou shalt do this, thou shalt NOT do that ...’

No, he is a God who is unafraid to roll up his sleeves, and get his hands dirty, and come and experience all the messiness of human existence, just as we do.

Jesus experienced life much as we do – with all its ups and downs, joys and sorrows, hopes and fears.

He knew what it was to party at weddings.

He knew what it was to mourn the death of Joseph the Carpenter, who was as a father to him; and to grieve the murder of his cousin John the Baptist.

When he says to us 'Follow me', knows what he is talking about, he knows what he is asking of us, and he knows what we can handle – and we can trust that he will not ask us to do more than we can bear.

And so Jesus puts out his hand to us, and says to us 'Come – come with me, and I will bring you salvation – life in abundance.'

As I was preparing to come here, I was pondering before God what salvation, what life in abundance, might mean for the people of Holy Nativity Hazendal, and the communities from which you all come.

What does it mean for light to shine in the darkness, in this part of Cape Town?

When democracy came, it seemed like the promise of light, bright and shining light, after the dark oppression of apartheid.

And in some ways, the light truly has come – we all have the vote, we have so many freedoms and options and possibilities.

Some people have been able to grasp those possibilities, and have made wonderful new lives for themselves.

But there is also darkness and disappointment.

The economic problems have not gone away, and in some respects are worse.

Poverty, lack of housing and poor service delivery, unemployment, gangsterism, substance abuse, alcoholism, crime, violence – especially against women and children – broken families.

There is not much light in these.

Then there was the World Cup – and a wonderful *gees*, a sense that the country could come together, could overcome our differences.

If our country, our government, could deliver such excellence in hosting the tournament, then, we felt, there was no reason we could not deliver excellence in every part of life!

But only a month or so later, that promise seems to be sliding through our fingers.

Public services – schools, hospitals, government offices – are in turmoil because of poor pay and strikes, especially where, in other parts of the country, they have descended into violence and intimidation.

Even though the Western Cape is more affluent, and often more organised, than other Provinces, we still battle to get basic services to everyone.

And narrow selfishness is taking over again – even in the form of a mini-bus taxi driver, who thinks he knows better than the rules of the road when it comes to crossing railway lines.

Our hearts are sore at what the families of those nine children must be facing.

Yet they are not the only people in this city who struggle with tragedy, loss, and family trauma.

So then, what is the salvation that Jesus Christ promises to us?

Certainly, it is the assurance of heaven – that all of us who put our trust in him will finally come to a heavenly home where our struggles are over, our hurts are healed, and, as it says in the Book of the Revelation of St John, where there will be no more death, or grief, or crying or pain, and God himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Yes, this is a wonderful promise, a glorious reassurance, in the face of death, which – as this week's accident showed – can threaten any one of us, and those we love, at any time.

Yet Jesus is not only the Lord of heaven, of life after death.

He also promised 'life in abundance' for us now. He said he came 'to bring good news to the poor, and liberty to the oppressed'.

What is Jesus' good news in the poverty and oppression of Hazendal?

The answer begins with another name of Jesus, one that we did not hear in our readings this morning.

It is the name, Emmanuel, which means 'God with us'; and the promise he left with his disciples before his ascension to heaven, when he said 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Mt 28:20).

At the Father's right hand, he now sits and prays for us, without ceasing: 24/7 – and he prays knowing what it is like to be human, knowing what we go through.

And at the same time, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he is present with every single one of us, every moment of every day.

His is the love that surrounds us, no matter how alone we feel.

His is the voice that tells us we are precious and important in the eyes of God, no matter what anyone else says to us or about us.

His is the ear that always listens, the shoulder that we can always cry on.

His is the hand we can put ours into, the ever-present source of strength to carry on.

He is the one to whom we take our questions, from whom we seek advice.

His is the still small voice that gives us encouragement, and helps us make the right choices.

And when we make the wrong choices – as we so often do – he is the one who is always there, no matter how many times we fail and fall. He is always reaching out to us, to help us to our feet again, and give us a fresh start, a new beginning.

His is the gift of peace – a deep inner shalom of quiet and trust, that truly does pass all understanding, all rational explanation – that comes to us, no matter how hectic the world around us.

In these ways, and many more, he is truly our Wonderful Counsellor, our Mighty God, our Eternal Father, our Prince of Peace.

Whatever the darkness, his is the light – perhaps for just the next step, but then after that, the next one and the next one and the next one.

Not only is this his salvation for us, it is also the salvation that we are to share with our community.

Remember that Jesus said, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed – a tiny seed that grows into a great bush.

Sometimes we look at the problems around us, and we worry that they are too big for us to make a difference.

But the salvation of God's kingdom comes from tiny mustard seeds – the little actions, the little words, by which, day by day by day, we share the love of God, we share his compassion, his justice, his mercy.

Here in Africa, perhaps we should say the kingdom comes in the way we eat an elephant – one bite at a time.

Every time we do the right thing, say the right thing – we are proclaiming that Jesus is Lord.

Every time we are part of the solution, not part of the problem – we are preaching the gospel of Christ.

Every time we show the fruit of the Spirit in our dealings with others – when we show love, and joy, and peace; patience and kindness and goodness; faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – then we are helping others to experience the fact that the kingdom of God is among us.

So whether it is in obeying the rules of the road, or the way we speak to one another in the home, in the street, at school, at work – every little thing we do has eternal significance; every little thing we do can be used by God; every little thing we do shares the hope, the truth, of the salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And because in Jesus we see a God who is unafraid to roll up his sleeves, and get his hands dirty in the mess of human existence, we should not be afraid of engaging with the problems of our societies.

And don't think that you are too unimportant or too few to make a difference.

Two thousand years on, we still keep reading about the shepherds who went to Bethlehem – and they were amongst the poorest and most marginalised of society.

Mary was just a teenage girl, who said “Yes” to God and changed the world for ever.

Some people do have political power, or financial strength, or positions of influence – and they must use them for good.

But the power that really matters, is that of which the prophet Isaiah spoke in our reading. He said God’s chosen one rules, ‘basing his power on right and justice, from now until the end of time’.

The Bible promises that the same power which was at work in Jesus, the same power that raised him from the dead, the same power of right and justice, is at work within everyone who is a child of God, with everyone who calls on the name of Jesus (e.g. Eph 1:19-20).

By the power of his name, the power of right and justice, we can bring his salvation to Hazendal, for – as the prophet Isaiah says, ‘The Lord Almighty is determined to do all this’.

Dear people of Holy Nativity, Hazendal – be encouraged! You are Jesus people – and he promises to bless you, and make you a blessing to the community around you!

May it be so!

Amen