

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
St Francis, Ravensmead – Patronal Festival
17 October 2010

Gen 1:24-28 – Humanity made in the image of God, and ‘given dominion’

Gal 6:14-18 – May I never boast except the cross of Christ; a new creation is everything!

Matt 11:25-30 – All things are given to the Son; come to me, all who are weary ...

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

It is always a bit of an adventure when I travel beyond the borders of Cape Town Diocese, so I am glad to have found my way safely to you this morning!

I am grateful not only to you all – Fr Makhalima, Wardens and Parish Council – for your invitation, but also of course to Bishop Raphael, for welcoming my visit into the Saldanha Bay Diocese!

Thank you to everyone here, for making me so welcome today: to the liturgical team, and all who are participating in this service – and, not least, to the community band!

And thank you to everyone all who has worked behind the scenes to contribute to all we are doing here today. Particular thanks also to all who have made donations of this ‘spring harvest’ of fruit and vegetables and other gifts for the needy of this community.

Such generosity is one of the distinctive characteristics of St Francis, which has led to him being one of the saints we cherish most on our calendar.

We love him for his simple and straightforward faith, for his passionate devotion to God and to humanity – especially the poor and the sick – for his love of nature, and for his deep humility.

In all of these, he gives us examples to follow, whatever our walk of life.

Most of all, when I think about St Francis, what I find both attracts me and challenges me is the way that all these different aspects of his character come together in a single whole, reflecting the way he sees God’s hand at work everywhere, and in everything.

There is no part of God’s creation in which we cannot see God’s fingerprints, and in which God is not at work in some way.

St Francis knew this, whether he was embracing a leper, or opening up dialogue between Christians and Muslims, or in writing his famous hymn to Brother Sun and Sister Moon.

God is everywhere – and, no matter where we are, no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, he invites us to open our eyes and be part of his purposes there: being part of sharing the good news of the Gospel, part of building his kingdom, part of the offering of praise and glory to his holy name!

I was struck by God's hand at work in all places earlier this earlier this week, watching those amazing scenes of the 33 Chilean miners being rescued.

You may have noticed that many of them were wearing a light brown t-shirt over their special green overalls.

On the front were the words 'Gracias Señor!' – 'Thank you Lord!' in Spanish

And on the back, I later discovered, was Psalm 95, verse 4 – which says 'In his hands are the depths of the earth, and the peaks of the mountains are his also.'

According to press reports, the T-shirts were provided to the miners at their request, at the initiative of the one who had taken the role of spiritual leader, and who had led prayer services every day at noon and 6pm while they were buried underground.

He also arranged for them to be sent a film of the life of Jesus – who of course was buried in a cave-like tomb from death to resurrection.

They too felt that they were in the hands of God, even while they were in the depths of the earth – and they trusted that he would bring them to new life, even if it took considerably longer than three days.

We must keep them in our prayers as they make the rather longer psychological journey back to 'normal life'. Their experiences will have affected them profoundly – even though they have, so to speak, been 'born again', and become a 'new creation' to use the words of St Paul.

But the key message here, and from St Francis' embrace of the whole of life, is that there is no situation in which God cannot bring about a new creation.

Faith is not just for Sundays. It is not just for church. It is not just for our private lives. It is not just for respectable people with tidy, organised, moral lives.

Faith is for everyone, everywhere, at all times, and in all circumstances.

As Jesus tells his disciples 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father.'

God the Father makes Jesus Lord of all creation, all of life, all humanity.

Everything IS in his hands, from the centre of the earth to the uttermost ends of the universe.

And his invitation to us is to recognise the truth of this, and to accept his Lordship – to acknowledge through the way that we live our lives, that actually, he is the

one who is in control and understands what is going on, in ways that are beyond our ability to comprehend.

This is at the heart of his invitation 'come to me, all you that are weary, and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest'.

Jesus knows that life can be draining, it can be hard work – at times it can feel like more than we can cope with.

Come to me, says Jesus – let me take the strain, because I understand what is going on here!

Now, this does not mean that everything will always have the sort of happy solution that we want.

It did for the 33 miners – and for that we praise God – but we know that there are good and holy people to whom bad things happen, who die young, who suffer deeply and unfairly.

But, says Jesus – rest in me, draw your strength from me, let me support you through whatever life brings to you. Live life with your hand in mine, because you can trust me, and my love will never let you go.

And we know that this is so, because even in death – which is generally what we fear most of all – Jesus has gone before us, and knows the path, and promises to lead us safely home.

We do not need to fret – he has done the hard work for us, through the cross and resurrection.

This is why, as we heard in our second lesson, we need only boast in the cross and nothing else.

An instrument of torture, of humiliation, of slow and painful death, has become for us the guarantee that no suffering, no oppression, not even death itself, can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ, as St Paul writes to the Romans (Rom 8:38).

He also says that nothing *in life* can separate us from God's love – and we need to remember this when we are faced with difficult situations – whether in our own lives or of the community around.

In Ravensmead, life can be very tough for so many – through retrenchments and unemployment; through violence and the activities of gangs; through abuse of women, and unwanted pregnancies; through the effects of alcohol and drugs; through all manner of consequences of poverty – well, we know it all.

Jesus' promise for those battling in Ravensmead, and those battling to make Ravensmead a better place, is also 'come to me and find rest'.

But he certainly does not mean that we should sit back and do nothing! Quite the opposite.

Rather, it is a message to us that it is not down to us to solve these problems in our own strength.

He does not say to the Church 'I've done my bit, now you do yours!'

Rather he says, come to me, because I know that life can sometimes be very hard indeed, and problems can seem insoluble. Come to me, and give me your tiredness and your burdens – and take up my yoke, my burden, instead.

Jesus inviting us to recognise that he is ultimately responsible for dealing with the suffering, the needs of the world – and all we have to do is fall in with his plans, to follow them as he directs, equipped by his strength, empowered by his love.

Because his solution is the best solution – and the only one that is guaranteed to work!

Don't take the responsibility of solving the world's problems upon yourselves, he says, you can't do it!

Remember – like St Francis remembered – the whole world is mine, and I am up to the task!

Saving the world is my business, says Jesus!

So just lean on me, he says, and let me lead you – come and be part of this wonderful work I am doing, but just remember that it is mine, and let me take the strain!

Today, as we celebrate the feast of St Francis, let us follow his example, in acknowledging the Lordship of Christ over all of Ravensmead – and open ourselves to be part of the healing, the redemption, the blessing, that he longs to bring here.

Reflect on this as you come to the altar rail – with hands open offering all that you are to Jesus, laying down your struggles to find rest in him; and with hands open also to receive from him bread to strengthen you for the journey ahead, as he places his gentle yoke on your shoulders and invites you to follow him, and share in his healing love for his world.

Amen