

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
St Andrew's Newlands – Advent Sunday
'Put on the Lord Jesus Christ'
28 November 2010

Isaiah 2:1-5,
Psalm 122,
Romans 13:11-14,
Matthew 24: 36-44

May I speak in the name of God, whose salvation is nearer to us than when we first became believers.

Dear people of God of St Andrews, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let me say again what a joy it is to be with you, as we celebrate Advent Sunday, the beginning of the Christian year.

Thank you again, Fr Mike and wardens, and to all of you who have made me so welcome.

Every year we sing the most famous of Advent hymns, in which we have just joined – O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Emmanuel, as I am sure you know, means 'God with us'.

And while we know that God is always with his people, made in his image – he is with us most of all in the person of Jesus Christ.

In Advent we recollect his first coming to us, and look forward to his second coming.

Two thousand years ago, the eternal second person of the Trinity, the Word of God, through whom the Father created all things, put off the glories of heaven, and became a baby in a manger at Bethlehem.

That baby grew to adulthood – and after three short years preaching and teaching, healing the sick and calling everyone to receive the kingdom of God, he was crucified for our sins on the cross of Calvary.

On the third day he was raised from the dead – and ascended to heaven, where, the Bible assures us, he sits at the right hand of God the Father, always praying for us.

And, in some way we cannot anticipate or fully understand, we know that he will one day return – his second coming – and all of creation will be caught up into the kingdom of heaven.

Thousands of words of speculation have been spilled on how this might be – but really we know very little other than the Bible's call for us always to be ready.

'Wake from sleep' wrote St Paul to the Romans. Be alert. For we live in a time when the kingdom both is, and is yet to come.

Our task is to continue to preach the kingdom of God, so that people may receive Jesus into their lives – that he may come to them, perhaps for the first time, if they have not previously appreciated what it is to be a Christian, and to know him as their Saviour and Lord.

We are also to preach the kingdom of God – that Jesus is Lord – throughout society, often through very practical ways that reflect the care God has for his creation and for people everywhere.

And we do so with Jesus as our model.

As we read the gospels, we see what it truly means for God in Jesus Christ to be with us – in every walk of human life.

It is often said that Anglicans place a high priority on the incarnation. I believe we are right to do so.

And it is on this that I want to reflect for the rest of my sermon this morning – what do we learn from the fact that God came to us as Emmanuel, in the human person of Jesus Christ?

In fact, when I look back, I now realise that this has been a key theme for me ever since I became Archbishop.

As I worked on the Charge, the sermon I preached at my installation, I was praying that God would lead me not only to what the church needed to hear, but to what I also needed to hear at the start of this ministry.

And so, in almost the opening paragraph, I spoke of the overarching need to 'discover afresh what it is to be the body of Christ in our time, and who God is in Jesus Christ, for us here and now'.

I did not realise at the time, how central these questions would become for me as I faced new responsibilities and challenges.

I have also come to see how they can be a touchstone for the wider church wherever we find ourselves both called and sent to proclaim the gospel.

They certainly provide me with resources for very practical engagement with the world – for example in dealing with politicians and the business world.

In answering these questions, our starting point is Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us. God's option is for humanity.

He is with us, along side us, and, more than that, one of us – to a degree we probably will never fully understand this side of heaven.

So, no matter what we face, God is with us. God is in the midst of this or that situation, among these and those people, desiring they find abundant life in him.

In Cape Town, this might mean anyone and everyone from the politician ensnared by the temptations of power, to the child bringing up younger siblings following their parents' death to HIV and AIDS.

Nor are we, as Christians, ever alone, in our vocation to be the body of Christ, in all situations and among all people: Jesus is with us as we seek to meet others in their needs; and in reaching out to them, we should also expect to encounter him already present there.

Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth, between eternal ideals and the limitations of practical reality.

Because he is, mysteriously yet compellingly, somehow simultaneously both fully divine and fully human, it is almost as if he does not so much bridge the gap as dissolve the gap within his one being.

Therefore, in Jesus we find God prepared to 'get stuck in', so to speak, rolling up his sleeves alongside us, ready to get his hands dirty.

This should give us confidence when we are faced with the complexity and messiness of life.

Isn't it often the case that all available choices seem to have both positive and negative aspects?

Often we cannot assess all potential consequences of our actions.

Often there is no obvious single right thing to say or do, but a whole complex network of interlocking options and possibilities.

In some situations we find Christians playing a variety of roles, that are not immediately clearly and directly complimentary.

It can all be very confusing – and the temptation is to say that it is too difficult, and so to do nothing, even when we see a clear need, in some way, for the kingdom of God, the love of Jesus, to be brought into that situation.

Thanks be to God! What I have found is that in Christ, in this incarnate Christ, I too can risk getting my hands dirty, so to speak, just as he did.

In doing so, I am set free from feeling obliged to seek out some impossibly perfectionist, purist, course of action that is, as some have described it, so heavenly minded that it is no earthly use!

In this way, Jesus, present, incarnate, is, above all, the starting point of my engagement with the realities of life that cross my path as Archbishop.

Yet in all this I realise I am generally not asking myself ‘What would Jesus do?’ because I know I am not called to be Jesus himself.

This is an important point to remember.

Jesus alone is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, offering the gift of eternal life.

It is rather that we need to ask ourselves, ‘How can I, how can we, help people come into closer encounter with Jesus? How can we better help them hear the gospel, his good news?’

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has put it this way: ‘Every vocation in the Church of God is a calling to be a place where God’s Son is revealed.’

He challenges us to consider where, in whom and in what circumstances, we had ourselves seen Jesus revealed – and then to reflect on how it was that we recognised the Son of God revealed in these places, these people, these events and circumstances.

At the heart of recognising Jesus is God’s love. As the well-known Taizé chant puts it, *ubi caritas, Deus ibi est*, ‘wherever there is love, there is God’.

This is how we recognise Jesus, and believe others can be helped to recognise him too.

This poses us the question of who, then, are our neighbours and how we can reveal Christ by showing them love.

How can residents of the lovely leafy suburbs of Bishopscourt and Newlands show tangible love in the impoverished townships of Mitchell's Plain, and vice versa?

How can South Africans towards Zimbabweans? Who else is the neighbour God sends across my path, and how shall I, how shall we, love them?

Or put it another way. Jesus is the one who is present and revealed in the bringing of healing and wholeness to a broken world.

To use the words Jesus himself quoted from the prophet Isaiah, reading the scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry – Jesus is the one who brings good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, whatever form poverty, blindness or oppression take.

Jesus is also the one who brings judgement – and we should not forget this.

Yet his judgement is not intended to condemn, but rather to show us what is awry in order to open our eyes to his better way.

Our criticisms of all that mars and impedes humanity's flourishing as God intended should be equally constructive, rather than condemnatory.

For the God who 'so loved the world that he sent his Son so that all who believed in him should not perish but have eternal life', as St John's gospel tells us, is the same God of whom we read in the very next verse that he 'did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him' (Jn 3:16,17).

So we recognise Jesus wherever the saving of the world is happening.

And while we all are to be channels that reveal this saving, thank God, we are nonetheless set free from any compulsion, any burdensome obligation, that we ourselves must save the world, and from a sense of our own condemnation if we fail in this task.

There is more.

Jesus, God incarnate, is our ultimate model of what it is to be fully human.

Human flourishing, is to grow in Christlikeness not merely in some overly spiritualised way but also in the flesh and blood realities of the fullness of life.

It is to live healthy, happy, wholesome lives – and not just a few of us, but all of us.

It is this we come to bring to the world, in the name of Jesus.

It is a matter of eternal values not so much being made concrete as being incarnated, finding human expression among those who are made in God's image, enjoying the wonders of God's creation, as God purposed for us.

This is our task. And it is for us to be ready, as Jesus warned us – we do not know when the Son of Man is coming; we do not know in advance when we will have the opportunities to preach his good news and work to bring about his kingdom, in our daily lives.

Therefore we must take to heart the teaching of St Paul to the Romans: wake out of sleep, be alert – and always strive to 'put on Christ', so that, through you, through me, the world may see Jesus, and know that, in him, God truly is with us.

Amen.