

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba

Midnight Mass

St George's Cathedral

24 December 2010

Isaiah 9: 2-7
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

May I speak in the name of the living God, who is born this day in the city of David: our Saviour, who is the Messiah, Christ the Lord.

As we celebrate once again the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, let me be the first to wish you all a Very Happy Christmas!

May it be a time of peace and joy, of promise and hope, of shared love with family and friends!

What, for you, is the heart of Christmas?

In the famous passage from St Luke's Gospel, just read to us, we heard how the shepherds came into Bethlehem from their fields, in order to find the baby Jesus; and how they told Mary and Joseph of their miraculous encounter with the Angel of the Lord.

They repeated the words the Angel had said to them – words which held the key to understanding these strange and wonderful events.

The Angel said

'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'

And then we heard that 'Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.'

In the days, the years, that followed, Mary pondered those words in heart, and wondered about what it all meant.

So - what does it all mean to you?

For many of us, a lot of our Christmas preparations has been about hunting for the right presents.

When you get home tonight – or perhaps when you wake up in the morning – you will find them waiting for you: under the tree, or at the end of your bed.

Presents like this. [*Bring out the box and show it round for all to see – then put it on the side of the pulpit.*]

Lovely, isn't it! So beautiful to look at! Aren't I lucky to have such a gorgeous present!

And, you know – perhaps it would be a shame to open it – because then I'd have to tear off the ribbons and rip the paper, and spoil its beauty.

Well, let me just leave it there for a moment and tell you a story.

There was once a man, a god-fearing man, who went to church regularly, and knew that the Christmas story is all about God the Father sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to be our Saviour.

One day, terrible rains came – it just kept raining and raining and raining.

The nearby stream began to rise, and rise and rise. The man began to get concerned, and he prayed 'Lord Jesus, come and save me.'

And the man's neighbour came by in his big 4-by-4, and said 'Let me rescue you, before it is too late – come with me.'

Yet the man replied, 'Thank you – I'll just stay here – I'll be OK. Jesus will save me.' And he prayed some more, 'Lord Jesus, come and save me.'

But the rain kept on falling and the waters kept on rising.

The man was now sitting on the window-ledge, because the flood waters were inside his house, up to his ankles.

And a policeman came past in a boat, and said 'Let me rescue you, before it is too late – come with me.'

Yet the man replied, 'Thank you – I'll just stay here – I'll be OK. Jesus will save me.' And on he prayed 'Lord Jesus, come and save me.'

And still the rain kept on falling and still the waters kept on rising.

By now the man was standing the roof of his house, because the flood waters were way up the walls.

And the emergency services' helicopter came and hovered above him and one of the crew leant out, with his loud hailer, and shouted 'Let me rescue you, before it is too late – come with me.'

Yet the man replied, 'Thank you – I'll just stay here – I'll be OK. Jesus will save me.' And he kept on praying 'Lord Jesus, come and save me.'

Still it kept on raining, still the waters rose, and finally the man was swept off his house, and he drowned.

Being a god-fearing man, he found himself in heaven, though he remained perplexed that Jesus had not saved him as he expected.

One day, he had the chance to speak to Jesus.

'Lord', he said, 'May I ask you a question?'

'Go ahead' said Jesus.

'Lord' he said, 'when the flood came, why didn't you answer my prayers and come and save me?'

'Well,' said Jesus, 'I sent a 4 by 4, then a boat, and then a helicopter – what more did you want?!'

What then is the moral of this story?

God our Father's greatest gift to us certainly is his Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

But we cannot merely receive him as the sweet story of a baby in a manger, and leave it at that.

To do so is to keep hold of a beautiful present, but never open it, and discover the treasures within.

Such a faith will be of little use to us.

We need to unpack our faith – and get to know what it means for Jesus to be our Saviour and Redeemer – the one who calls out to us ‘come with me’ to us, every day of our life.

This can be a challenge. First, we have to let go of any beautiful romantic ideas about faith, and take up Jesus’ invitation to ‘follow me’, not knowing where he may lead us.

His call is to follow his example – to live according to his standards – to turn our back on all that is destructive in human behaviour, and to strive for all that is good.

We have to give up selfish living, doing things our own way, and do things God’s way instead.

This is not always easy – but there is good news for all of us who dare to put our lives into the hands of the living God.

For, as we heard in our first reading, he promises to be to us a Wonderful Counsellor.

He will guide us in our choices about how we ought to live, so that we may be, as our second reading put it, ‘zealous for good deeds’.

He will be the Almighty God, who encourages us with his own strength, to live the lives to which he calls us, so we do not have to do it on our own.

He will be our Everlasting Father, who loves us and cares for us, far more than we can ever imagine.

His infinite love is for every single one of us here.

And he will be our Prince of Peace, so that whatever life brings our way, we can have that deep assurance that he will see us safely through, if we hang on tight to him.

In these, and many other ways, we will find him meeting us, not only in churches and on Sundays, but – as my story, though a joke, illustrated – in the every-dayness of our lives.

This is a Christmas present worth unpacking.

And, I can assure you, that no matter how long you live, you will keep on finding new treasures, as you ponder the meaning of those words of the Angel, in your heart.

‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’

May this be to you the best Christmas gift of all.

Amen.