

Archbishop Thabo C Makgoba
Christ Church Constantia – 150th Anniversary
6 March 2011

1 Kings 8:22-30; 1 Peter 2:4-9; Matthew 21:12-16

May I speak in the name of God, the master builder, who calls us to be his living stones.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear people of God of Christ Church Constantia, let me say again what a delight it is to be with you as you celebrate 150 years of Anglican worship and witness in the Constantia Valley. Thank you, Keith – and Gladys – for your warm welcome; thank you churchwardens; thank you to everyone involved in this service, and to all who have taken part in the wider celebrations that you have been enjoying. It is a real pleasure to be with you this morning!

When I first came to Cape Town, one of the great challenges on a Sunday morning was finding my way to wherever I was due to preach. Some of the churches of our Diocese are not easy to locate. But that is not the case here – everyone knows of ‘The Stone Church’ on Constantia Main Road: this beautiful building of Table Mountain sandstone.

Just a week ago, I was looking at very different stones – the limestone of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Temple where Jesus cast out the money-changers. No doubt St Peter was with him there on that day – and on many other occasions. Perhaps you remember the account in St Luke’s gospel, where the disciples were marvelling at the amazing rebuilding of the Temple carried out by Herod the Great, twenty years before Jesus’ birth. Jesus warned them not to put their trust in mere buildings, no matter how impressive, telling them that not one stone would be left standing.

Well, in 70AD, the Romans destroyed the Temple, almost completely. Today, only the lowest levels of Temple date from the time of Jesus – and a little more remains at the corners. The foundation stones of the Temple are vast – many are more than forty feet – twelve metres – long. Most weigh 70 tonnes or more, and the very heaviest is estimated at perhaps as much as 550 tonnes. At the corners, these huge stones are interlocked. They withstood the Temple’s destruction rather better than the rest of the building, and can be seen today, standing above the old foundations.

We don’t know whether St Peter wrote about Jesus as God’s cornerstone before or after this happened, but he certainly understood the way a good cornerstone strengthens the whole building. Nonetheless, pictures from New Zealand of the collapsed cathedral tower in Christchurch – where it was thought up to 22 had died but in fact, thank God, no bodies were found – remind us that, as Jesus said, we should not put our trust in stones, in bricks and mortar.

This is the message at the heart of our readings today. Solomon’s prayer declares that God cannot be contained, even in the holy of holies of the Jerusalem Temple. Rather, it is the place on which God looks with particular compassion; and the place in which, and towards which, people pray. In this way, the Temple is the focus of human life intersecting with the love of God, and his active presence with us.

And if anyone has any doubts about what this might mean in practice, well, they could do a lot worse than read through the wonderful commemorative book produced for your 150th anniversary. I was fascinated to read the story of Anglican worship here – through far more twists and turns of history than I had imagined. Not only did the apartheid government try to stop coloured people living and worshipping here – at one point, an earlier rector tried to make the white members of the parish go elsewhere!

But we are not really here today to mark the history of, first, a thatched chapel, and then this stone building. No, we are here to celebrate the living faith of Jesus Christ, vibrant among his people, over a century and a half. For it is the faithfulness of men and women, who held together, no matter what, which has withstood the buffeting of time, and kept this congregation, this worshipping community, alive – indeed, alive and thriving. So we pay tribute today to all those who have served here in the past: to clergy, of course, but perhaps rather more so to those families – and especially those coloured families – who have been at the heart of Christ Church life, over generations: families like the Adameses, the Williamses, the Pelstons, the Davidses, the Petersons, the Elys, and many more.

Our thanks are to you, and to your parents and grandparents before you. We know that your faithfulness came with great pain, at great cost. We also know that, without you, and without your commitment, we might not be here today – or we might be a very different church from the one which can produce such a broad and deep and rich Annual report as the one you shared at vestry this week. (You can tell I have been doing my homework, before coming here!)

Surely this is what it means to be living stones – creating amongst yourselves a focal point for people to encounter God, whatever the circumstances of their lives. We know that through Christ Church, people meet the living God, and find his love, his compassion, his strength, his comfort, his leading, his encouragement – even his judgement at times, in order to find his redemption, and his power to transform what is wrong and bring good out of evil.

The strength of the vast stones of the Temple in Jerusalem lies most of all not in their size and weight – but in the way they interlock. Where they were built together, they best withstood the Romans' destructive efforts. The same is true of living stones. St Peter is not writing to individuals. He is writing to congregations, to Christian communities: let yourselves be built into a spiritual house – let yourselves be built together – to be a holy priesthood.

This is your calling, as the people of Christ Church, Constantia. God has chosen you. Yes, each of you individually he has called by name, as the prophet Isaiah says. But he has called you to belong to one another, so that together you can be his royal priesthood, his holy nation, God's own people.

And he calls you together for a purpose, says St Peter: 'in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.' We proclaim his mighty acts through our words, and our actions. This is the life of worship, witness and service to which we pledge ourselves at confirmation. This worship, witness and service are most effective when the whole congregation shares together. As St Paul puts it in his first letter to the Thessalonians, 'Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.'

Today I say this also to you, 'keep on encouraging one another, and building up each other, as indeed you are doing':

- through morning and evening prayer and the prayer diary, the prayer chain and the fellowship groups;
- through community outreach and hampers and love-packs, and through the shop;
- through pastoral care givers and bereavement visitors and providing funeral teas;
- through the music and the flowers and the contribution of lay ministers and servers and readers and sidespeople;
- through the gardening group and the handyman team;
- through preparation for baptism, confirmation and marriage;
- through work with children and young people, as well as the seniors;
- through the wardens and parish council, the office and all the administrative work;
- through ... well, the list goes on and on and on!

Now Keith, I know, is a construction engineer by training. He will no doubt tell you that a building doesn't just need corner-stones. It needs bricks, it needs mortar, it needs plaster and roofing, plumbing and electrical work, it needs doors and windows, ceilings and floors, everything from huge joists to tiny screws. Thousands of different pieces must be fitted together like an unbelievably complicated jigsaw. But each piece is necessary, and must find its proper place.

And the same is true of us. We are all different. We all have different gifts, different aptitudes, different abilities, different expertise and experience. Yet God calls each of us to play our part. None of us is unimportant – all of us make a difference to God's plans, God's blue-print, for us. We make a difference by fitting in with God's plans – and we also make a difference if we are fail to do so, perhaps because we are too hesitant, too timid.

But we should not be afraid, because God's promise to us is that we matter, and even in small things, what we do counts, what we do matters – what we do has eternal significance. Our gospel reading reminded us of this. The praises of little children and babies can be more important in God's great schemes than all the fancy words of religious leaders – now there's a warning for you and me, Keith! So do not be afraid to let God use you as his living stone, and place you where he most wants you to be. And the promise of his Spirit is that he will help us to become the people he calls us to be.

Perhaps you might find another picture more helpful – the picture of the vine. 'I am the true vine' says Jesus, 'Ek is die ware wingerdstok' (Jn 15:1). He tells us to abide in him, and then, through his Spirit working within us, like the sap of the living vine, we will bear much fruit.

I must admit that when I first saw the Wingerdstok Cross, it almost took my breath away. It is so simple – yet it is so profound. The gnarled and twisted wood, the thorns, the nails, speak to us powerfully of the struggle of our own lives, and the struggle and pain of Christ on the cross. But they also speak of persistent life, irrepressible life, life that holds on and endures, through good times and bad, through fair weather and foul, through sun and rain, through cloud and storm.

This is the life that God assures for all of us, if only we abide in the true vine, if only we abide in Jesus – if only we are living stones, allowing ourselves to be built around the corner-stone that is Christ. For on the cross Jesus Christ has borne our pains, our suffering, our own sins, and the sins that have been perpetrated against us. He has suffered death so we can live; and so that we can share this same hope of life with others.

None of us know what the future will bring. Those people who first had a vision for an Anglican chapel in this valley – both white and coloured – none of them could have guessed what the next 150 years would bring. Sometimes life was easy. Sometimes life was more than tragic. But God is faithful and sees us through.

Today, we do not know what lies ahead. Certainly, there will be change. Keith will retire at the end of the year. But no-one needs worry, as long as Jesus is the cornerstone of our lives.

Dear people of God of Christ Church Constantia, my message today is very simple. Abide in Jesus. Abide in his love. Each of you, in your own heart – and all of you together, living in mutuality, caring for one another, allowing yourselves to be cared for; building one another up in love and faith, as God's holy people.

Develop the habits of deepening prayer, and Bible study. Put your hand in his, and journey with him through your lives – as individuals, and as a community. Let him teach you, and lead you, into an ever deepening relationship with him. Let him use you, to build up the life of this congregation – a life of joyful praise and worship; and a life of faithful witness and dedicated service to the communities who are rooted in this valley.

For truly, 'you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.'

So be it. Amen and Amen.