

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Confirmation at St Paul's Rondebosch
2 October 2011

Is 5:1-7; Phil 3:12-21, Matt 21:33-43

May I speak in the name of God, who calls us to bear the fruits of his kingdom.

Dear Brother and Sisters in Christ, dear people of God of St Paul's, Rondebosch, let me say again what a joy it is to be with you again.

Thank you, Derek and Karen, for your invitation; thank you wardens, and all who have contributed to today's service.

On my last visit, over two years ago, we were celebrating the 175th anniversary of the opening of the first church on this site – that later became one of the historic foundation stones of the Diocese when the first Bishop of Cape Town came a few years later.

As I said then, all of us owe a debt of gratitude to those pioneers of the nineteenth century, who had the vision, and the determination to plant and grow the church.

Today planting and growing the church is also on our agenda.

Our readings have a lot to say about planting, tending, growing, and bearing fruit.

This is what we hope to achieve in the olive grove which I shall bless at the end of the service – I'm almost surprised that it isn't a vineyard in which you are investing in partnership with Royston Lamont!

But planting, tending, growing and bearing fruit are also at the heart of the service of confirmation.

In many ways, baptism is like the planting of a sapling.

Young children are brought within the household of God, set into his garden, if you like – and parents and godparents make promises to nurture them in the faith.

But today, in confirmation, you make your pledge that you yourselves will take over that nurturing of your own faith.

And faith requires very much the same sort of dedicated, ongoing care that plants and vineyards and olive groves.

Gardeners who neglect their gardens, farmers who neglect their farms, will not find the flowers flourishing and the crops bearing fruit.

Even in the rich and fertile, well-watered, soil of the Western Cape, it is not enough to plant the seed and then just sit back and wait for harvest-time!

Not only will your plants fail to reach their potential, you will also find them overrun with weeds – even the thorns and briars mentioned in our first reading!

And all of this is true for the life of faith, as well.

We need to look after our faith, from our first breath to our last.

Our prayer books say that ‘Baptism is to be understood not merely as the rite of a moment, but as the principle of a lifetime.’

The same is true of Confirmation. Today is not the completing of the story that began with baptism.

Instead it is the beginning of a fresh new chapter – a chapter that goes on to the end of your life – a chapter that makes you part of God’s own great story.

So then, what does it mean to tend your faith, so that it keeps on growing and bearing fruit to the end of your life?

Well, first, we must remember, St Paul’s words to the Corinthian church, that ‘I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth’ (1 Cor 3:6).

Growth is God's gift – just as faith is God's gift. He who created the earth, and made plants and animals with the gift of life, and sustains them in being – he also created faith in us, and sustains our spiritual life.

In confirmation, he too is making a promise – expressing his love and commitment, not only for all of humanity in general, but to you [*names*] who present yourselves before him today.

His covenant word to you is that he will never leave you or abandon you. He will always be 'there for you'.

[This is not to say that life will be easy – often, hard and challenging times come our way – but we can be sure that he actually is with us, and we will find that his love and strength and comfort will sustain us when we need them.]

Yet you also have to play your part in developing this relationship with him, and in tending the seedling of faith.

Reading the Bible, coming to church – especially to the Eucharist – and prayer are the main important ways.

Prayer is like the sunshine which all plants need – especially the sort of prayer that is listening to God, not giving him lists of things we want him to do for us – though he loves to hear us talk to him about our lives, sharing our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows. He loves us to open our hearts before him.

It is as though he invites us to come and bask in the sunshine of his love! His love has all the warmth that we are now enjoying as spring once more returns to the Cape!

Coming to Church to receive the Eucharist feeds us, just as a plant needs feeding and fertilizing. We are fed with the word of God, and with his body and blood – not merely a few calories of bread and wine, but the strengthening of our souls and spirits for the life to which God calls us.

And reading the Bible helps us to know – alongside the teaching of the Church – how it is that we should live. This lets us know what is good, and what needs weeding out of our lives!

Gardeners not only tend their favourite plants, they also need to get rid of the weeds – and we too will have to make decisions about what we include and exclude in our lives, such as the bad habits we must give up, or the choices we make in our work, in the friends we have, in the way we spend our time, our money.

Taken all together, this is the life of worship, for which we pray that the Holy Spirit will fill and empower you in confirmation, together with witness and service.

For we grow in faith, in the love of God, so we might be his faithful servants within his church and in his world – sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, and pointing others to the glory of God, through the way we live our lives, through the words we speak, through the attitudes we communicate.

For Jesus calls us to be labourers in God's harvest fields (Matthew 9:38), so that others too may grow in newness of life, and live fruitfully.

[You might want to add more here about our task to promote human flourishing in all of society through promoting the 'common good' – e.g. as expressed in the Constitution's commitment to 'free the potential of each person'. Jesus provides our vocation, through his promise of 'life in abundance', and our pattern, through his incarnation.]

This is why the Churches, the faith communities, need to throw their weight behind all that promotes the fullest and best expression of the Constitution – everything from promoting freedom of speech, transparency, honesty etc, opposing corruption, holding politicians accountable. We need to strive for the justice of which our first reading spoke. We must work together to develop a broad and rich civil society that can engage constructively with government ... And all taking particular care of those who are least able to grow and flourish by themselves. This is why you are to be seen among the open sewers of Khayelitsha]

One of the things I have learnt since moving to Bishopscourt is that the work of tending the garden never stops!

In different seasons, there are different priorities – and in our own lives, we may also find that at different times, the focus of our faith may change.

At times we may be called to love God more with our minds – and this does not just mean theology! Even if we are studying business or literature or anything else, we can love and serve God in the way we study with diligence, so that we build firm foundations on which we can draw at later stages in our life.

Perhaps you are not one for gardening – but you can look at Christian life from the perspective of building instead, if you prefer! Jesus referred to himself as the corner-stone, the key stone, around which the whole building finds solidity and stability – he is our rock, our foundation.

Good building work lasts – which is, in its own way, a different sort of bearing fruit. This is what we are commemorating in the blessing of the Fry Porch at the end of this service – both the physical porch, and the legacy of Fr John Fry, who was Rector here from 1839 to 1861.

But to return to the matter of seasons - there may be times when family, or work, take priority. There may be time when we are focussed on the life within the walls of our churches – and at other times, our service of God in his world may be what consumes us.

What matters is that our ears are open to the voice of Jesus, so that we hear his voice saying ‘follow me’, and are ready to go wherever he leads us.

We need to have the sense of perseverance of which St Paul wrote to the Philippians, in our second reading.

By God’s grace, we pray that all of us may also press on as he did, to the goal of Christ set before us.

This is particularly our prayer for you, dear Confirmands [*names?*], as you go forward from today.

We pray that you, and all of us, may 'forget what lies behind' and 'strain forward for what lies ahead' – striving towards the goal of 'the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.'

May it indeed be so.

Amen