

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Sunday Morning Sermon
St James' Cathedral, Toronto
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Revelation 7: 9-17

9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' ¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹²singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' ¹⁴I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

1 John 3: 1-3

¹See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Matthew 5: 1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

May I speak in the name of God, who calls his people from every nation, and language and people and tribe.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, dear People of God of St James' Cathedral, Toronto, it is a great privilege and a great joy to be with you this morning.

Thank you, Dean Doug Stoute, for your invitation to be here – to give the Snell Sermon later today – but also to be able to share in worship with you this morning.

Our first reading, from the Book of Revelation, gives us a picture of the worship of heaven, of which our service now is just a foretaste.

We who are here may come from many different parts of the world, and represent great diversity in not only our nationalities and languages and cultures; as well as also in terms of our breadth of backgrounds, experiences, personalities and characters.

But we are nothing like as many or as varied as the countless multitude seen by St John in his vision, described here and elsewhere in the Revelation, as together caught up in worshipping God, in worshipping Jesus, the Lamb of God, the Saviour of the world.

Yet unity in diversity is hard for us to grasp.

Yes – we read the words, we have a mental picture, perhaps, of what this might mean for heaven – but it is by no means easy to place this image alongside the reality of how hard we find it to deal with difference in our own circumstances, and not least within the Anglican Communion.

The aptness of those other words from the Johannine Community, which we heard read in our second lesson, comes home to us: 'Beloved, we are God's children now; [but] what we will be like has not yet been revealed.'

It is a bit like being called to know the peace of God which passes all understanding!

We are caught in the paradox where we have some inkling, some awareness within us, of what we are called to be and become – and yet are also have a daily experience which, on the surface at least, seems very different.

Yet there is a sense in which we can know what we cannot understand – we can encounter something that takes us beyond ourselves, as the Revelation to St John records.

God, in his grace, reveals himself to us, and reveals his calling to us, in ways that draw us forward into what we might be.

And of course, the ultimate revelation of God is found in Jesus Christ – the incarnate second person of the Trinity, taking human form, embracing the human condition,

even accepting mortality, as he takes upon himself the sins, the brokenness, of this world.

As it is sometimes put – echoing the words of St Peter's second letter – God in Christ participates in our humanity so that we might participate in his divinity (2 Pet 1:4b).

This is what our second reading also assures us – 'What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.'

So then, the remedy for our struggling with disunity within the Anglican Communion is to look to Christ, to put on Christ, to be found in Christ, to grow in Christ-likeness, to be clothed with Christ – so that we can recognise Christ in one another.

The eyes have, in my view, rightly been called 'windows of the soul' because it is when we hold another's gaze, and when we hear another speak from the heart – it is then that we can recognise that Christ lives within them.

This can be a challenge.

Sometimes it is easier to restrict our encounters with others to questions of doctrine and theology, or matters of church order and the details of liturgy – or even of politics and human rights and social justice.

It is often less easy to speak of our deepest experiences of God's love, since often we know his tender touch most profoundly in those areas of our lives where we are most fragile, most insecure – perhaps most broken or wounded or hurt.

And so it can be hard to share what God has done for us, without revealing our own weaknesses.

Perhaps this is why disagreements over religious questions can become so vicious – because we feel threatened at the root of our faith, in the areas where we are most vulnerable.

But it is when we dare to open ourselves up, to reveal the life of Christ within us, then we shall meet one another truly 'in Christ'.

And when I know that you are my brother, my sister, in Christ – when I see Christ living within you, when I feel the love he has for you – then it completely changes the dynamic of our relationship.

In the Snell sermon later today, I shall speak more about our experience of holding together in Christ, in the church in Southern Africa, over our many differences of language, race and culture – both the lessons we learnt through the apartheid era, and what this has meant to us more recently, in terms of disagreements over human sexuality.

We have found that the only way to deal with difference is to wrestle together in Christ.

Sometimes it feels as if we meet at the foot of his cross, with the pain of all our divisions, which he bears for us. Yet we also know the pain of the cross as the point from which redemptive possibilities flow.

We are still learning what this means in Southern Africa – there is still more close listening to be done (and sometimes, in consequence, actions to be taken) so we can grow in reconciliation and overcome the continuing legacies of our apartheid past.

I was glad to read that within the Anglican Church of Canada – even in Dioceses like yours that were less directly affected – there is a commitment to ensure continuing listening to one another, so that the pains of the legacy of the residential schools can continue to be addressed.

It is clear from such experiences that it remains so very important that Christians, that Anglicans, keep on talking, no matter how painful our disagreements, or how insuperable the barriers to agreement may seem.

For all this is not just for us – it is for the sake of God's broken and needy world.

You will recall that at the Last Supper, Jesus prayed that his disciples might be one 'so that the world might believe' that he was sent by the Father (Jn 17:22) – sent so that all who believe in him might not perish, but have eternal life (as it says in Jn 3:16).

For as the following verse underlines, 'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him' (Jn 3:17).

And so our calling is to be caught up into this saving, redemptive, work of God in Jesus Christ.

This is something we seek to do in very concrete ways.

As Anglicans we seek to do it through the relationships of our global Communion – including, not least, through the various partnerships that we pursue.

I know that you continue to uphold the link between the Diocese of Toronto, and my former Diocese of Grahamstown, and have another link with Ghana.

There is also your Primate's fund, which has done so much to promote mission in other parts of the world.

And it is when we stand in solidarity together – a solidarity that reflects our interdependence, our mutuality, our reliance upon one another – that our message to the world speaks more loudly and more clearly.

This is vital when it comes to our witness to the world in areas of social and economic justice.

We found a new strength in the voice of Christians standing together – and drawing in those of other faiths and none – in the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the repealing of debt.

We saw it too in relation to Make Poverty History, and the support we have given to the Millennium Development Goals.

We are also beginning to see it – but still have some way to go – in relation to protection of the environment, and combatting climate change and all human activity that puts our planet at risk.

I was glad to read the ecumenical statement of the Churches in Canada, committing themselves to bring attention to the government of the need to act urgently.

In just a few weeks, the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change, 17th Conference of the Parties – COP-17 – opens in Durban, South Africa.

Civil society groups from across the world – with faith communities among those at the centre – will be making our voices heard. I pray you too will be there making your voice heard.

Our governments need to know that their populations will not accept anything less than clear commitments to take concrete steps to safeguard our future.

And in standing together, from across the world, we also make clear that such commitments must be just and fair.

We know that in this time of global economic difficulties – difficulties of our own making it must be said, of the making of the economically powerful, who have pursued their own narrow, short-term interests, at the expense of all else – that in these times of economic difficulties, it is not easy to take hard decisions.

But I need to underscore, from my perspective from South Africa, that the rich and the powerful must shoulder their responsibilities. Jesus words, that 'from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required' (Lk 12:48b). Surely this does apply here.

And I am sure that there are many other areas where Christians must learn to overcome differences and stand together, so that the message of the gospel – of good news for the poor in this world, and the fullness of God's redemptive promises for the life of heaven – can be communicated clearly and convincingly.

So let me finally turn to our gospel reading for some further reflections on how we do this.

The key I want to use for reading, on this feast of All Saints, the Beatitudes which we know so well, comes from those same words of St John's first letter – that what we will be – what we are called to become – is like Jesus.

For it seems to me that Jesus is the one to whom we must look, if we are to know what it truly means to be 'poor in Spirit'; to be rightly 'meek' and 'merciful' and 'pure in heart'; to mourn as Christ mourned for all that is damaged and lost in our society.

When it comes to being peacemakers, to hungering and thirsting for righteousness, or even bearing persecution and the slander of others – then Jesus Christ is our model.

My question to you today is this: how can we not be blessed, if we walk in the ways of Jesus?

And how can we not be a blessing to others, if we allow ourselves to be conformed to the pattern of Jesus, and so direct others to receive the good news of the kingdom of God, of healing, of hope, of liberation, of redemption, which Jesus offers?

So then, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear people of St James' Cathedral – let us dare to wrestle together in Christ, to stand together in Christ, and to grow in Christ, so that the world might see him more clearly, and come to believe that he is the only Son of the Father, sent for the redemption of this world.

Amen