

Monday, 14 November 2016



Christ Church, Kenilworth

Sermon preached by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba at a Confirmation Service of St John's Parish, Wynberg, Cape Town:

2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13, Luke 21:5-19

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

It is good to be with you today. Thank you, the Revd Rob Taylor and your Churchwardens, for inviting me to be here. Thank you everyone for your warm welcome.

As we were entering preparing ourselves for the procession, a seven-year-old named Terry interrogated us. Looking at the five of us wearing our cassocks and surplices, he said: “Why are you men all dressed up in women’s clothing,” and singling out the Revd Nobuntu [Mageza], he said “at least you are a woman, that’s fine.” Out of the mouths of babes indeed! Later on I will return to another story of a three-year-old.

Congratulations, Duncan [McLea] for the Theological Venture you are exploring – we looking forward to the fruits of the exploration, and looking forward to the training of men and women in theological matters. Our congratulations to all those from St John's, from St Peter's and from Christ Church, who are being confirmed and received today. A warm welcome too to your friends and family who have joined you for this wonderful occasion.

Today’s Gospel lesson creates an opportunity to reflect on two tensions

between life and death, between external and internal beauty, between big and small. Let start with the first lesson set before us. It opens with an evocation of the beauty of the Temple in Jerusalem. The disciples were admiring the rebuilding of the temple carried out by Herod the Great, twenty years before Jesus' birth. Had the temple they looked at survived until the modern era, it would probably be classified today as one of the seven wonders of the world. That's an extraordinary distinction—just consider the uniqueness of the mountain in whose shadow we worship, and that five years ago that mountain was declared as one of the “New7Wonders Of Nature”.

Well, as a man-made architectural wonder, the Temple in Jerusalem would have been viewed with the same regard—as a structure as unique and as wonderful in the built environment as our Table Mountain is in the natural world.

It took fifty years for Herod to rebuild this temple, restoring it to its glory in Solomon's day. It was revered as a sign of God's presence, even as the dwelling place of God's sheltering protection for Israel. Faithful Jews knew the Temple testified to God's unique majesty.

So it is with some alarm that the Jews hear Jesus predicting what will happen to this beautiful temple. Jesus says of these things that you are looking at, that the days are coming when not a stone will be left, that there will not be a stone that will not be destroyed. The destruction of Jerusalem was seen as the end of the world for Judaism, and for the Jewish Christians. The Temple was central to their way of life, associated with the presence of God, and it was almost impossible for the disciples to imagine the destruction of the temple without the world coming to an end.

It is for this reason that they asked: Teacher, when is this going to happen? What is the sign that the end is about to take place? Jesus' response to them is: Take care not to be deceived because many will come using my name and say “I am He”.

When you hear of calamities such as uprisings, wars and revolts and cosmic disasters such as earthquakes, famines, hurricanes and "signs in heaven" such as lunar eclipses and comets as signs of the end, do not worry; these are things that must happen but the end will not come so soon.

Jesus details the persecution that his followers can expect to face before the end—persecution; trials before government authorities; betrayal by family and friends; hatred on account of Jesus' name; and even execution—but, he says, he will give his followers words and

wisdom, and they must be faithful and endure.

In Thessalonica, the people to whom Paul wrote believed that end of the world was so imminent that they abandoned their customary work and began to live lives of idleness. Today also, we have prophets of doom predicting and waiting for the end of the world. Some of you may even feel that the leadership of certain presidents, in more countries than one, might mean the end of the world. Let me ground this big picture of the heavenly, the ancient and the biblical with the ordinary within our context to make my point clearer.

Jesus always has the amazing ability to move people from the grand, the big, the external to focus on the details of the small, the internal, the intrinsic, to real issues that matter in life. Let me demonstrate those and this tension between life and death, life and the end and its meaning for us as Christians.

A three-year-old posed a direct question to her mom, rather impatiently asking: “Mommy what is it to die?” And mom for the umpteenth time evaded the question. This three-year-old was generally concerned about her kitty who died and never returned. But Mom was not able openly to discuss life and death or the issues of mortality with her child.

Pick another story of the garden in Bishops court. There is a beautiful plant, green and crisp with very pointed leaves and it gives a beautiful reddish, orangey flower for winter. It is called the Chasmanthe. In winter as I said it is beautiful. In summer it wilts, it dies, it looks like someone has poured, hot water on it, as if someone had trampled on it. The wilted leaves become an eyesore on the property. If you did not know what it was you might even dig it out and throw it away. However the next winter it resurrects into life and gives us its splendour—almost a reminder for me that for Christians death is not the end.

My last example drives the point home, especially for you confirmation candidates. It is an example of guinea fowl, Egyptian geese and an owl at Bishops court. One day you see 12 chicks and goslings, the next day seven, the next day three and the next day one. By the number of the owl's droppings, you get a sense of where they went. It would seem the end of the chicks supports the life of the owl.

I want to talk to all of you about the meaning of Christian living for you, of death and of the end, and of how you handle this transitory nature of our vocation. I want to ask those of you who are to be confirmed today, and indeed all of us: how do we feel about the second coming of Christ? How do we feel about the end of the world, about what

we call Christian “eschatology”. Christian eschatology is the theology of the last things, the end of time and history and the coming of the kingdom of God. It comes from the Greek word, *eschatos*, or last. How do we deal with this prospect in our own lives? Do we sit idle like the people in Thessalonica or do we get on with our lives?

For me, the truth is that if you and I admit our own mortality, if we acknowledge that our own lives in this realm are transitory, we are able to appreciate the seasons of our lives and our own intrinsic dignity, whatever our age or circumstances. Being able to speak together with honesty about our deaths, or the second coming of Christ, is one of the greatest gifts we can give one another.

In the Church, “you and I” are an eschatological community as the Kingdom of God, present through Christ. Our Christian hope is vetted in the victorious Christ who will come to judge the living and the dead. Paul responded to the idleness of the people of Thessalonica by reminding them of the warning that if they do not work they must not be fed. Today, both Paul and Jesus, in the Gospel reading, suggest to us that our best preparation for the future as an eschatological community is to endure the challenges of life, to devote our attention to present duties, to maintain a holy and healthy balance between prayer and service, labour and play, and to develop lasting family ties and values. Our unique calling is to do what no one else can do: to live out our baptismal promises in lives of faithful worship, witness and service.

Let me say a little more about worship and witness. Worship is about growing in closeness to God. Growing close means we need to spend quality time in his company. This is what we do in Church, in reading the Bible, in our prayers – where we need to learn to listen, as well as to speak! God can speak to us in all sorts of different ways. Sometimes even the words of a hymn that we sing seem to have a special message from God to our hearts.

Witness means communicating the truth about God to others. A witness in court has to tell the truth about a person or an event. We tell the truth that Jesus is our Lord, and that living his way is the best possible way to live. And as we look at society around us, our lives should proclaim that ‘God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’

As witnesses of Christ, let’s take the examples of “fees must fall”, the struggle of the students which I am told some in this parish, including Craig [Stuart] at The Warehouse, are concerned with (which I am

grateful for and dealing with.) Witness means courageously ensuring that all have access, not some. The students, particularly black students, have defined this struggle as one against white privilege and black pain. There is no use being defensive about this, or ignoring it as a parish. We have to engage with the students and witness to the living God. Of course we cannot condone violence, we must condemn it with every iota of our beings. But we must engage with what the students are raising for the good of our country.

Today at these confirmations Jesus asks us to say Yes to him – yes to living life his way; yes to letting him provide the answers to the decisions we have to take, whether in our lives as responsible citizens in Cape Town, in South Africa or the wider world; yes to committing ourselves to working to ensure that all may enjoy God's bounty and protection. Jesus asks us to say Yes to a life of witness, worship and service – today in confirmation, Jesus, and his Father in Heaven, with the Holy Spirit, say their Yes in return. Yes, says Jesus – by the power of the Spirit, I will be with you in everything. I will be your companion on life's journey. I will be the listening ear. I will be there for you to lean on – even a shoulder to cry on when you need it. I do not promise that everything will go just the way you'd like it to – but I guarantee it will be a journey worth taking, a life worth living, of deep satisfaction and meaning; of significance not only for this life, but for all eternity. And when I ask something hard of you, says Jesus, I will give you the strength, I will give you the resources you need. I'll never ask you to do something that is beyond you.

And when there are times when we mess up – as there inevitably are, in all of our lives, no matter how old we get, no matter whether we are Archbishops or not – Jesus is there for us. No matter how often we fall, his patience is infinite – and when we are down, he stretches out his hand to us and waits, so that when we are ready to take it again, he will help us to our feet, help us brush off the dust, help us refocus on the path, help us take the next steps. And no matter what, he will never leave us to cope alone. He is ready to give us a second chance – an amazing God indeed!

I think the clearest picture is this – whatever life demands of you, God will put his hands out to you, ready to embrace you back home. We offer him all that we are – and he gives back everything we need – and more besides, because he prefers limitless generosity to balancing the bottom line. Therefore, when we do our calculations, the answer is clear – we can dare to follow Jesus, we can dare to take up his challenge, we can dare to make the promises that are asked of us in confirmation, because

he is the one who will make it possible to keep these promises.

So with joy and confidence, let us celebrate with the candidates today, who are now about to make their promises, and embark on a new journey, filled with all the blessings of God.

Amen.