

<b>Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2014</b> <b>Cathedral, Grahamstown</b> <b>7.30 &amp; 9.30 a.m.</b>		<b>ALL SAINTS' DAY</b>
Jer 31:31-34	Ps 150	Revelation 7:2-4, 9-12
		Matthew 5:1-12
<b>ALL SAINTS' DAY</b>		

“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 ... And 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...” (Rev 7:9-11)

### **All Saints Day – a time to remember**

On the 1<sup>st</sup> November each year, Christians everywhere celebrate All Saints Day, Abangcwele Bonke. It is the day after Halloween, which gets its name from the old English title “All Hallows Eve” – the eve, or evening, of All Hallows Day or All Saints Day. “From its earliest days, the Church has recognised as its foundation stones those heroes of the faith whose lives have excited and encouraged others to holiness...”<sup>1</sup>

Today we celebrate the lives and the faithful witness of all the heroes of the faith, people who have inspired and challenged and invited us to discover and live in the fullness of God’s love for us and for all people. Some are recognised by the wider church and community, as people who have had a significant impact on the life of the church or community or nation, people who by their courage and bold witness to truth have turned the tide, have changed the direction of a country, have left a lasting legacy for good.

Others are known only to you and me – but I hope that we all have people in our lives who somehow bring out the best in us, who have

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<sup>1</sup> *Exciting Holiness* pg 373

helped us through confusion and despair to a place of peace and light, people who simply by us knowing that they are around and that they are continuing with their life of prayer and loving service, through storm and turmoil, have helped us to do the same. It may be a family member, a godparent, a friend; it may be someone at school, or a work colleague, or someone we have got to know and respect, someone from our past – someone whose constant loving positive influence on our lives has been formative in making us the person that we are today. Someone who has excited us to holiness.

All Saints Day - and All Souls Day, the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed, which we shall celebrate this evening - is a time to remember, a time to give thanks, a time to grieve and mourn, a time to be comforted and strengthened. All Saints Day and All Souls Day remind us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, all those who have gone before us, the “living dead”, the amadlozi, our parents, our families, our spiritual ancestors who have shaped us with their love, their example, their witness.

All Saints Day and All Souls Day remind us that we are part of the Communion of the Saints – “the whole family of God, the living and the dead... bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer and praise.”<sup>2</sup>

## **All Saints Day – life overcoming death**

All Saints Day is a time when we acknowledge the triumph of light and love and life over darkness and hatred and death. Nearly every week brings its tragedies, its sorrows, its sad deaths. I wrote this sermon as we were preparing for the funeral of my beloved mother. But also in the last few days we have had the murder of Senzo Mayiwe, the 27 year old Bafana Bafana goal keeper and captain; the country is still abuzz with the Oscar trial and his killing of Reeva Steenkamp on Valentine’s Day last year; just two weeks ago was the

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<sup>2</sup> The Catechism, AAPB pg 444, #142.

tragic death of Florence Pswarayi's grandson, Ungawo-amandla; the death toll in west Africa from the Ebola virus is now in the thousands.

As we say during the Funeral Service: "In the midst of life we are in death: to whom can we turn for help, but to you, Lord..."<sup>3</sup> Life seems to be so utterly cheap, so worthless at times. Death comes randomly, it touches here, there, without meaning or purpose. We do our best to prepare for exams and tests; we plan and try to see what is ahead of us, but it is very hard to prepare for death. Death is all around us, and so often it comes when we don't expect it, when we are completely unprepared. Especially in times of sickness or war, death is all around us; lives are thrown away, discarded.

But All Saints Day, and All Souls Day, remind us that death is not the end; that while death is the end of this life as we know it, it is also the beginning of the perfect life with God beyond the grave. All Saints Day reminds us of the great value of each and every human being; we are reminded of the love that God has for us all; we are reminded that "nothing in all creation – not even death - can separate us from the love of God"; that "all things work together for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28ff.) We are reminded that in the midst of the great tragedies and the trauma and the sorrow and the horror of death, especially tragic or violent death, we are wonderfully held in the love of God; and that as random as death seems to be, each person who dies, and those around them, is precious and beloved in the eyes of God.

"Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth more than the birds? ... Even the hairs of your head are numbered..."

## **Lives that make a difference**

The Gospel reading for All Saints Day is the Beatitudes – those who, Jesus says, are the truly blessed. It is also often read at a funeral.

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<sup>3</sup> AAPB pg 541

We hear these words in the context of loss and grief, gathered around the family of someone who has died, and we are confronted by the true values that make for life: “blessed are the poor in spirit, the gentle, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail, the peacemakers”. And sad as that funeral may be, a Christian funeral is also a time of deep thanksgiving for that person’s life and witness.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus speaks to his disciples of the values and attitudes of the heart for which God looks. The actions that God will bless. The qualities that we as individuals, we as the church, are called to live out. The way of life that, if we follow it, will lead to a completely new order of human society. The kingdom of heaven on earth.

Instead of being ruled by anger and bitterness and resentment, instead of revenge and hatred and suspicion and mistrust directing our lives, instead of deceit and betrayal, Jesus calls us into a different way of living: to be gentle and humble, to hunger and thirst for what is right, to be merciful, to be peacemakers. The values, the marks, of a saint.

One such person, from recent South African history, is Beyers Naude.

At the recent Beyers Naude Memorial Lecture<sup>4</sup>, delivered in Port Elizabeth last Monday, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba spoke of what he called “South Africa’s new struggle”. He acknowledged the courage of Beyers Naude who spoke out against wrong “when it was being perpetrated by people from within his own [Afrikaner] community.”

The Archbishop spoke of the prophetic role of the church, and said, “We have too often silenced ourselves by practising quiet diplomacy with those in authority, flattered by access to power and ready too quickly to acquiesce when we hear how difficult their task is. In the

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<sup>4</sup> *South Africa’s New Struggle – Beyers Naude Memorial Lecture*, 27<sup>th</sup> October 2014. A keynote address by the Most Revd Dr Thabo Makgoba, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, as part of the Beyers Naude Memorial Lecture Series at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

apartheid era, courage enabled students to ignore bullets and guns and to risk their lives to work for the ideal caring, compassionate society we dreamed of. But courage is fast dissipating in our society, fear seems to be enveloping all of us and if courageous voices don't speak out, there is no one to provide our ruling elite with a moral compass."

He spoke about the fear which pervades our country, and said: "We have to bring to an end the failure of white South Africans to speak their minds, because when they keep silent for fear of being branded racists, they fail to contribute to solving our problems. We have to bring to an end the failure of black South Africans to speak their minds, because when they keep quiet for fear that white racists will exploit differences between blacks, they too fail to help solve our problems."

He identified corruption as one of the biggest threats to our democracy. He argued that corruption is not simply a Western thing or belief, but that to fight corruption is a fight for social justice.

"Corruption is paralysing progress across South Africa today.... If you are pro-democracy, you must also be anti-corruption. If you behave corruptly or make a corrupt decision, you are opening the door to losing the fight for democracy...."

While recognising the separation of Church and State, he argued that religion is critical to the functioning of democracy – because religious people, you and me, believe in a set of personal values that guide our lives. It is these values of honesty, respect for one another's property, and respect for other people that are essential to democracy.

## **CONCLUSION**

South Africa needs us, as the people of God, saints, called to be holy, to live our lives, to live our values, to live our beliefs, in the public arena, in politics and business and schools, at work, in our communities, on the streets. Without us, our country, our democracy, our society, will crumble. God calls us to be saints – holy people. Our

country needs us to be saints – called by God to faithful service and witness.

Let's be people through whom the light and love of Christ shines.