

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY SEPTUAGESIMAE

(Cape Town - 20 January 2008)

Text: ¹⁴ What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” ¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” ¹⁸ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. ¹⁹ One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?” ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? ²² What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? ²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory— ²⁴ even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:14-24)

If you read the last newsletter, you will have noticed that I made some kind of a commitment for myself in 2008. The commitment was that I would really like to make more effort in keeping my “quiet time” in the early morning. I have noticed that if I don’t keep a quiet time for Bible reflection and prayer I tend to rush into the day and sometimes get quite overwhelmed with the various issues I am trying to deal with.

But also as a family we have a devotion in the morning. We had a most captivating devotion this last Friday. It was about “The most pious dog in the world”. The author said, he always grew up believing that if you don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t go to a disco, and don’t mix with people that do so, you are a good Christian. But one day as he was looking at his dog, it struck him: My dog doesn’t smoke, he doesn’t drink, he doesn’t go to a disco, and we don’t allow him to mix with dogs that do so. And therefore he must be a great Christian.

We all realise, of course, that something is wrong in this analogy. But being a Christian is indeed not so much about what we *don’t* do (I don’t smoke, I don’t drink), but rather what we do “do” when we realise that we belong to God.

Anyway, I enjoyed the devotion so much that I was still reflecting on this “the most pious dog in the world”, when I read this sermon text. And when I read it, it struck me in turn: God is not a dog!

We have two small dogs at home, Bonni and Noah. As all dogs really these two are very loving animals. They give love and seek love all the time. If you enter the house, they immediately approach you without exception. If you give them a bit of a chance they jump on your lap and may even try to lick your face.

Martina is very special with the dogs. I am different. Sometimes I accept their love, but most of the time I just ignore them. At times when I am irritated I chase them out of the house - especially if they bark too much. And when I do, they look at me with almost tearful eyes.

But God is not a dog. God is not someone whose love I sometimes accept and then at times ignore again. If life is great, I praise him and shout "halleluiah". But if there is hardship in my life, I blame him and literally chase him out of the house. "How can you allow this to happen to me?", I shout. "This is unfair. This is *not* something I deserve." And if I ever do reflect about "hell" (which we usually don't, I cry out: "What kind of God is this, who lets people suffer in hell for all eternity."

These expressions of anger, are rooted - of course - in a certain assumption. In the case of our two dogs, I just assume: They need to be nice to me all the time. And likewise we sometimes assume: God *must* show us love all the time! I just assume: I have a *right* to divine love. I have a *right* to divine mercy. Or to put differently: "God is obligated to provide me with a perfect life." If there is suffering, if my life stands on its head, God is in trouble: I am just going to ignore him. Or worse, I will make him responsible for all the "wrongs" in my life.

These and other accusations levelled at God are not new. In the time of the Bible there was a debate, that if I am saved by grace alone, then God must be responsible if I go to hell. But listen to what Paul says. He says: "**Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?**" In others words, "Who do you think you are. Your life isn't in perfect. You sin all the time. And then you still have the cheek to accuse God." God is not obligated to show anybody mercy. God is not obligated to forgive you your sins, even when you ask."

Paul uses the analogy of the potter. If we confess that God is the creator of all and that he formed us, then in many ways he is indeed just like a potter. A potter takes a lump of clay. Then "he" decides what he wants to do with it. Out of the one piece of clay, he makes an ornament of captivating beauty and immeasurable value. Out of the other piece of clay he may decide to make a common, everyday coffee cup. Who are you to tell what he must do? The potter has the "right" to do with the clay whatever he wants too. This is true for God as well.

I am reminded of a story told by a German evangelist shortly after World War II. Walking the streets of his town, he was one day approached by a rather frustrated man. The man said: "Pastor, if I should ever meet God, do you know what I will say to him?" The evangelist asked: "What?" He said: "I will say: God, you knew children would die of hunger, while others had in abundance - and you did nothing! God, you allowed this terrible war to happen in which millions of innocent people died - and you did nothing to stop it. God, you were silent went people were abused and exploited." "And do you know, what I will say then", the man asked? "I will say: Away with you. I don't need you. Get off that throne of yours".

And the evangelist look this man straight in the face and suddenly shouted back: "Yes, away with this god, away with this god!" Totally stunned the man looked at him. He didn't expect that from a pastor. And the evangelist continued in a mellowed tone of voice and said: "My friend, this God, who must give account to you, doesn't exist. But there is another God, the living God. And

this God you don't judge. He judges you."

God can do what he wants too, Paul says. If he wants to show mercy, he shows mercy. If he wants to have compassion, he has compassion. And if he, for whatever reason, decides to harden the heart of somebody, as he did with Pharaoh, he can do it. He can save and he can condemn. That is the living God.

But please understand: You have no "right" on salvation. Everybody falls short of the glory of God. There is not a single person who can say, based on his or her life: "I deserve salvation. I deserve God's grace." There is nobody. In fact the word "grace" excludes it. Grace means an "undeserved" gift.

If you I therefore hear the words: "Your sins are forgiven", then that is a miracle. If you hear the words: "You are loved by God", then that is a miracle. And this miracle happens because God based on his free will, *decides* to love you.

We are so used to this love of God. We write it on the wall of our church: "Loved by God". But so often it doesn't even touch our heart. We don't realise a miracle has happened. Christmas comes and goes. Many don't even come to church to praise him and to listen to the proclamation of his love.

God doesn't have to love you. It is a "decision" on his part. He decides: "I am going to give my Son to save this world!" He decides: "I will forgive you when you sin". He decides: "In times of hardship, I will not desert you." He decides: "I will never test you beyond your means and I will always give the strength to bear it."

But don't believe: "He *has* to". His mercy, is *mercy*. It is unmerited *grace*. If his declaration of love, touches your heart, a miracle has happened to you.

Let us get back to the dog in that devotion I referred to initially. If you understand Christian faith as being motivated primarily by prohibitions, you haven't really understood it yet. The Christian faith is not defined by laws and regulations: You are *not* allowed to smoke, You are *not* allowed to drink. That is passiveness. It says what I must *not* do. Christian life is characterised by activeness, by the things that I do.

When I am touched by the love of God, I become very active. In fact, I am set free. I am free to go to church on Sunday. I am not pulled into any other direction. I am free to love another person. I am free from gossip and the need to run somebody else down. I am free from seeking recognition, because I am recognised by the almighty God.

But this new life is never realised, when deep down in my heart, I believe that God is "obligated" to love me. I will never discover God's love, if I believe that I have a "right" to be loved by him.

But when I realise: God, whose wrath and punishment I earned, has decided to love me, then my heart is touched. And when God's love touches me, "grace" becomes foundational in my life. I

want nothing more, but to be with this God. I want nothing more but to share his mercy with others. Or, if I am trouble, or face a hardship, he is the first one I call on. Likewise, if I am happy, he is the first one I share my joy with.

There is a God that loves me. He doesn't have to. He chooses to do it. That is a miracle - a life changing miracle. Amen.