

SERMON ON XENOPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA (Cape Town - 1 June 2008)

Text: "Do not mistreat foreigners who are living in your land" (Lev 19:33).

It is not often that I reflect on a current political or social issue in our country. However in view of the events making head lines not only in our country but worldwide in the past three weeks, I would like to make an exception today.

When I left Cape Town on Thursday last week, the xenophobic attacks on foreigners in our country had not erupted here in the Mother City yet. And maybe we had all hoped that these attacks would never reach our city and would remain a problem far away. But we got the news of attacks in Cape Town as we were travelling back on Sunday last Sunday.

I must confess I didn't realise the magnitude of the problem until we had our ministers fellowship meeting on Tuesday at the Dutch Reformed Church in Bothasig. Having heard of these attacks, I had of course put xenophobia on the agenda of our meeting, but living so comfortable and secure myself I, never realised how severely people had been affected. It totally dominated our discussion at the meeting, In fact, we are having a follow-up meeting this coming Tuesday morning, here in our Church at St Thomas.

Reading the newspapers and listening to people talking it is obvious that the reactions on these xenophobic attacks are rather diverse. On the one hand people have opened their hearts and even their homes and churches for displaced foreigners. On the other hand, however, there has also been muted support for these attacks. Many have concluded: It is high time that all these millions of foreigners who deplete our already struggling economy are sent back home again.

As we reflect on this today, we need to realise that everything in life is a matter of perspective. And the question is: From whose perspective are you looking? Our natural inclination is, of course, that we look at anything that confronts us from our "own" perspective. And indeed from this perspective, it may make absolute sense that the wealth of this country belongs first and foremost to those who legally belong here.

On Tuesday afternoon, however, I travelled to Silverstream, to one of the refugee camps outside of our city. I wanted to see for myself what these foreigners are going through, and to try to assess some of their needs. But what made this journey interesting and enriching was that I travelled with a Zimbabwean minister, called Benjamin Pedro. Pasor Pedro is a minister in Richwood, who every now and again attends our ministers fellowship. In Richwood he serves a predominantly white congregation. He had come to South Africa quite a few years ago to further his theological studies. And while he was

busy on his post-graduate studies he received and accepted a call to this congregation.

Now when these xenophobic attacks started last week many foreigners, called on Pastor Pedro for help, knowing that he is a Zimbabwean national. So while I was travelling with Pastor Pedro I asked him for “his” perspective on what was happening.

He reminded me of the atrocities that take place in his own country, Zimbabwe. In fact at the moment, he says (and it confirms what we read in the media) that there is a brutal attack on MDC supporters in Zimbabwe. This last week a major in the army visited the school where his brother-in-law is teaching. And the teachers there and at other schools were told in no uncertain terms that they should *not* waste their vote on the MDC leader, Morgan Chanderi.. If he should win, they were told, there will be a civil war in Zimbabwe.

We hope that this never happens. But fact is, people in Zimbabwe live in constant fear. And those that have fled from Zimbabwe or other African countries in the past and have come here, have not done so primarily to enrich themselves, but just to save their own lives.

Some of these foreigners may have become criminals in South Africa But Pastor Pedro believes that this does not apply to most of them. In fact many foreigners are well educated, sensing first the atrocities in their country, voicing their opposition, and fleeing when being threatened.

But unfortunately, when these foreigners cross the border into South Africa there has been little to no control. Initially it may seem like a blessing. You can just cross over. But the flip side is that their status in South Africa is not cleared. They have no “papers”. These poor people are *illegal* immigrants.

This means, they cannot get a job that corresponds to their level of education. They settle in the townships and have no choice but to compete for work with the poorest of the poor.

But they work. When I ask Pastor Pedro: “What is the difference between the South Africans and the foreigners”, he says: “Their work ethic.” They work. They know, there is not grant from the state. And the money they get, they tend to save. Soon they start an own business, a grocery stall, or a cell phone shop. And the locals get angry. “They take our jobs, they take our women”, they say. And the pot boils over.

In the refugee camps families are split. Refugees asked pastor Pedro: “Can you find my wife, or my child please. I don’t know where they are.” Thousands are leaving our country. Others again, like the Zimbabweans, are to scared to go back. “Dogs that ran away, are not well accepted”, Pastor Pedro says. Most refugees are sitting between a

rock and hard place. There is just no where to go.

What is our response? There is little doubt in my mind that our government has messed up. And the government needs to hear this. But you and me as individual Christians, what is our response?

There is a story that Jesus told that fits this scenario perfectly. It is about a man who landed in the ditch. On his way from Jerusalem to Jericho he was attacked. He was totally helpless. And a priest came by. And when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. Then a Levite came. When he saw the man, he also passed by on the other side.

Interestingly Jesus does not disclose the “nationality” of the man in the ditch. Was he a fellow Jew? Was he a Samaritan? Was he a Greek tradesman or a Roman soldier? We don't know. And we don't know, because it does not matter. Bottom line is, there was somebody who was in need of help.

When somebody is in need of help, that is not the time to discuss politics or consider one's own perspective: Is this man really my neighbour? Could I be endangered, if I help him?

The Samaritan who comes that way, just stops when he sees the man. We read, “He had compassion”. And in having “compassion” he *does* what the Law of God demands.

What touched me the most this last week in Silverstream and the Community halls in our area, were the volunteers, the helpers. I don't know where they come from. But they cook, they comfort, they console. Not everybody can do that. But there is no doubt: In these people *God* is active. And do you know what? Although tired of all the work, these volunteers radiate a deep sense of joy and happiness often lacking in my own life..

I came back from Silverstream and started reading my Bible. What does God's Word say about foreigners? This question interested me as we all know that the ancient Israelites were a very exclusive group. They hated foreigners. They preached neighbourly love, but only towards their own people.

As always, the Word of God surprised. One of the verses I read was the text I read to you, Leviticus 19. God says to the Israelites: ***“Do not mistreat foreigners who are living in your land”***

This sentence is repeated at least 10 times in the books Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. In fact the “foreigners” are elevated to the category of the poor and the widows who get special protection and care from God. . In Leviticus 23 we read: ***“When***

you harvest your fields, do not cut the grain at the edges of the fields, and do not go back to cut the heads of grain that were left; leave them for poor people and foreigners” (v.22). And in Deuteronomy (16), a passage that refers to worshipping together, we read: ***“Be joyful in the LORD's presence, together with your children, your servants... orphans, widows and foreigners who live in your towns”*** (v.11).

God sides with the vulnerable. And do you know why? Because he has compassion? And he says to the Israelites: “Have you forgotten? In Egypt *you* were the foreigners. And therefore love the foreigner as you love yourself” (cf Ex.23:9; Lev.19:34).

Compassion is not learned. Compassion is the result of an experience where you once experienced mercy. The first Christians were merciful. They knew what it means, not to be wanted. But that is why their doors were always open. Their faith was characterised by the love they had for one another and others.

Question: Have you experienced mercy? The answer is “Yes, you have”. When we read this parable about the “Good Samaritan” we often identify ourselves with the good Samaritan. It is nice to be good. But that is not what Jesus was trying to communicate to his original audience. He was trying to say: “You are not the priest, you are not the Levite, in fact, you are not the Samaritan either. You are the man in the ditch”. Maybe you haven’t realised it yet, but Jesus is the Samaritan and you are the one in need of help. He comes to you and his mercy on you. When you realise: I am the one in need of help, the Kingdom of God dawns on your life.

When you have consciously experienced God’s mercy, you don’t ask: “Do foreigners need my help? You help. That does not mean certain issues in our country don’t need to be addressed. They need to be addressed, as they were addressed in the past. But you and me, we see the pain and the need of others and allow God to use us as instruments of his mercy. And I sincerely believe that what is happening in country is an “opportunity” to grow in our faith and to become more Christ-like. Amen.

Dieter Reinstorf