

## SERMON FOR THE 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Cape Town - 8 June 2008)

**Text:** <sup>1</sup> The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>2</sup> "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: "'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?" <sup>3</sup> "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel... But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. <sup>22</sup> None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live. <sup>23</sup> Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? (Ezekiel 18:1-3, 21-23)

The words of the Prophet Ezekiel were spoken in the middle of the Babylonian Exile. It was a terrible time for all Israelites, especially for the rich and the affluent ruling class. It was not only a matter that they had lost all their possessions almost overnight, but they had been deported to a foreign country. In this country they became the working class, suppressed and exploited by others. This lasted not only last for one or two years. It lasted for three to four generations.

According to Scripture there was a *reason* why this deportation took place. It was the direct result of a people that over generations had ignored the clear commandments of God. There was no real love towards God or the neighbour. The Israelites had become a self-focussed people. Everyone promoted his or her own well being. Life was all about "reaching my own goals", with little to no care for others.

The prophets of God warned the people and said: "You cannot live like this. You are making a fool of a holy God." But they wouldn't listen and they weren't prepared to repent and to turn from their evil ways.

But even more striking is that the people "in" exile wouldn't listen to God either. Somehow it can be expected that people who enjoy the riches of life will not necessarily heed a call for repentance. But when people are struggling and suffering, when they are battling to cope, one surely expects them to listen to God.

But it did not happen in Babylon. And the reason for this extraordinary phenomenon was the way the way the people of Israel "interpreted" their fate. They interpreted their fate in such a way, that they simply shifted the blame for what happened to them to others

This we see in the proverb, which introduces our sermon text. Ezekiel says: "***The word of the Lord came to me... why do you people quote this proverb: 'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?***". And then he continues and says: "**God declares, you will no speak like this anymore!**"

What was the meaning of this proverb? Apparently it was a well-known proverb in ancient Israel as some of the well-known sayings that we may use, like: "What goes up, must come down" or

“What goes around, comes around”.

The Israelites said: “*The fathers eat sour grapes*”. In other words, the fathers committed the sin. And then “*the children’s teeth to rot*”. In other words, “we suffer for the sins of our fathers, committed, 20, 30, 50 years ago!!”.

The question is: Is it true? Do people suffer for sins committed by previous generations? Fact is, it is a view expressed frequently by ourselves. “I suffer, because my dad is so poor?” (That is my children whenever we go shopping) Or (on a more serious note): “Why must I suffer, the sins of apartheid committed by my parents?” Is it true that we suffer for the sins of our parents?

Reflecting on this, we realise, of course, it is not totally untrue. Many people do suffer because of what their parents did. This is true not only for apartheid, but all spheres of life. If a father or mother is not a good example, it rubs off on the child. If the parent is never totally committed to anything in life, do you expect the child to be committed?

And by the way, there are precedencies of this proverb in the Bible. We believe in original sin, meaning when a baby is born, it is already born in way that is prone to commit sin. And it is passed on from one generation to the next.

We see the same in what Luther termed the “Closing of the Ten Commandments”. We read in Exodus 20: “*I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation*” (vv.5-6). And we sense it is true. Alcohol abuse, divorce, cheating and swearing, can have a negative effect on children for the rest of their lives. And that is why God is so “jealous” that we keep his commandments. We set the tone, positive or negative, for generations to come.

But why then does God get so upset when the Israelites in exile quote the proverb, “The fathers eat sour grapes; and the children’s teeth rot”? The explanation is quite simple really. There are two reasons why God declares a ban on this proverb:

The first one is: If you always seek to blame others for your hardship and suffering, you will never recognise our own sin.

That is exactly what happened with the Israelites. Were they better than their fathers? Were they less ego-centric? Did they try harder to keep the commandments of God? Did they show more contrition for sins committed?

No, they just blame the fathers. My mother is guilty, my father is guilty, my work is guilty, my church is guilty.

Let me use baptism as an example. Usually when a child is born, we are so grateful and we bring the child to church to be baptised. At baptism we make promises about how we are going to raise our child as a child of God, who becomes an active member of his church.

But soon after the baptism of the child there are many other responsibilities to cope with. I am a parent myself. Sometimes I feel like a taxi driver: To school, back from school, hockey practise, choir practise, school outing, and in between there is home work. And, gee, I am quite busy myself.

And suddenly for some people remembering their commitment to God, remembering the Sabbath Day is far in and between. The school is to blame. My work is to blame. Or my church is to blame. It is not exciting enough.

“Stop”, God says. You are shifting the blame. You are pointing to everybody else. How about reflecting on your own life? How about confessing and saying: “I have done wrong”.

The Israelites were so busy blaming the “fathers” that they never realised their own wrongs, and they never confessed their own sins.

The second reason, why this proverb was to be banned, was: We need to learn to take responsibility for our fate. We need to stand up and take account for our own lives - no matter what we experience.

As I already said, sometimes we do suffer because of what “others” did. My children suffer because of what I do. And in South Africa the apartheid of the passed does affect our lives today. And the Israelites were indeed in exile because of what the fathers did.

But Jesus is an example of somebody who suffered at the hands of others, but was never distracted from God. And his apostle, the apostle Paul, is also a good example of somebody who also suffered, but recognised in every suffering an opportunity to grow in his faith. When Paul is ridiculed, when he gets a lashing, when he is thrown into prison or is chased out of a city, there is no bitterness in his response. On the contrary. To the Romans he writes: ***“We rejoice in our suffering, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character; and character hope”*** (5:3-4).

The question is not: *Who* caused me the suffering and the pain? But: “How do I deal with it?” You have a negative experience, how do you deal with it?

I don’t deal with it by blaming others. I don’t deal with it by moaning and groaning. I deal with it, when I recognise an opportunity to grow; when I recognise an opportunity to show faithfulness towards God; when I recognise an opportunity to make a difference.

Those are the people we need also in our congregation. If you want your church to be a strong force in your life and others, well, then get behind it. If you want your children to get the best Sunday school available, then get behind it. If you believe the Gospel of Jesus will make a difference in South Africa, then dedicate yourself to be a good example and to spread the Word wherever you can.

The Prophet Ezekiel was urging the Israelites in exile to address their suffering, not by shifting blame, but by turning to God and consciously confessing the wrongs in their “own” lives. God says, *“Do you think I take pleasure in generations to suffer? I don’t! I am prepared to give you a new start every day. And I make it possible through forgiveness”*. You may still be blaming somebody else, but God has most probably forgiven that person long ago. And whether that other person has in fact repented or not, is not your problem. Your task, my task, is that we look at our “own” lives and where necessary confess: “God I have sinned. I haven’t kept your commandment.” And God declares: “You are forgiven! You may still be in ‘exile’, but this is the start of a new day.” In Jesus God gives a new day every day. But you don’t have this new day, when you blame others and fail to recognise your own wrong doings.

The Spirit of God has spoken. A gracious God is on stand-by, but the decision to stay where you are or to move forwards is yours. Amen.