

SERMON FOR THE 5TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Cape Town - 15 June 2008)

Text: ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17-21)

“Do not repay evil with evil... If you enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.” These words of the apostle Paul seem a far cry away from what we have heard in our news headlines almost every day of the past week. There seems to be more evil in the world than what we in our generation have ever experienced before.

Politically this was a really a bad week again. On Thursday the provincial ANC secretary general, Mcebisi Skwatscha, addressed a local ANC meeting in Worcester. And believe or not, while he was addressing his own people, some who obviously didn't agree with him, stabbed him in the neck and almost murdered him.

On the other side of the border, in Zimbabwe, things are worse than ever. On Friday morning, when I switched on my radio I heard that Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the MDC, had been detained twice on the same day. Worse was: He was never charged and always released just a few hours later. But by harassing him this way, the opposition clearly prevented him from rallying. On that day he couldn't address his own supporters, as he had obviously planned.

Earlier in the week, on Tuesday afternoon, I went to a Lutheran pastor's conference, where a member of the TAC addressed us on the xenophobic attacks in our country. At this meeting a Zimbabwean national reiterated what we have heard so often before in the news. He said, no matter how bad it is in the refugee camps of our country, returning to Zimbabwe was for most of them not an option. It is like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. That is how bad it is in Zimbabwe.

Evil seems to be on the rampage. And history indicates that it tends to sway from one side to other. The pendulum force (in others words, makes the pendulum continue to swing without settling) is the evil that comes from our own human hearts. The Bible indicates that we a “reactionary” beings. Somebody pushes me, and in almost like a knee-jerk reaction I immediately push back.

This is true even for the animal world. You will have noticed it with your dogs. When one dog barks, the other dog almost involuntarily barks back. Sometimes I look at Bonny, our dog, and say: “Will you please stop barking. Don't you realise if you don't stop, this barking will just continue.” And he looks at me with these puzzled eyes, and barks again.

This is just how we are, we react in kind. So we will agree that if Paul calls on his congregation and us, not to repay evil with evil but to overcome evil with good, he asking us to do something as “unnatural” as can be. In fact, it is against every grain of our human body.

But this is where the Christian message makes all the difference. We need to realise that when God entered this world in Jesus Christ, he dropped (excuse the pun) a bombshell. For the first time this world encountered pure love.

Love was God’s answer to the aggression and the evil state of this world. When the pendulum of evil swung Jesus’ way, and he was ridiculed, he didn’t ridicule back. When he was hit in the face, he turned the other cheek. When they nailed him on the cross, he prayed for his executors. Understandably, when the Roman centurion, who guarded the cross of Jesus saw this, he sensed, this is not natural, and concluded: **“Surely, this is the Son of God.”** What is happening here is from another world!!

The “love of Christ” was God’s answer to a world that has a knee-jerk reaction to repay evil with evil.

The way to love and peace is a long journey. But it so important that we realise, where this journey starts. In starts with the realisation that as we make an effort to overcome evil, that we are dealing with a humanity of “sinners”. This knee-jerk reaction, you I hate me, I hate you, is the result of sin. And therefore in search for peace “our sinfulness” needs to be addressed.

Here in our country our politicians love to speak about “ubuntu”. It is word often used in the past few weeks as a positive response to the xenophobic attacks. “Ubuntu” really summarises a Zulu or Xhosa saying that goes like this : "Umuntu ngumuntu ngamuntu", which translated literally means: “A man is a man only through other men.” Now by quoting this word “ubuntu” the politicians are hoping to create peace by making us realise that we all need one another.

This is a noble effort, which I applaud. But the problem is, we need to realise, we are dealing with *sinners*. To remind you again, that is the topic of this Sunday: “The Congregation of Sinners”. In this world, both in and outside of the church, God is continually dealing with sinners. And despite all good will, we all have the problem of the knee-jerk reaction. And as the knee jerks the pendulum of evil swings and swings.

How does this stop? The first step is something between us and God. We need to realise: In God’s relationship with us, he has stopped to repay evil with evil. Jesus came in demonstrated this in his own life. You ignore God, he doesn’t ignore you back. You break his commandment, he doesn’t immediately condemn yo to hell. You forget to pray, he provides for you anyway.

In Jesus God comes and brings us love. And as he brings unconditional love, the war between him and us stops. God just doesn’t hit back at us anymore. Instead, knowing that we are sinners, he seeks to overcome the sin, by showing his mercy and his forgiveness.

Now, all of us here, we have experienced this goodness of God. And that is why these words of

Paul are addressed first and foremost to a Christian congregation. Here, where people have met the gracious God, repaying evil for evil stops.

And by the way it stops with the small things in life. Somebody shouts at me, I don't shout back. Somebody steals my rubber at school, I don't steal somebody else's rubber in return. And we need to communicate that to our children already: We are different, because we know the love and the grace of God.

Despite of what is being said, the apostle Paul is and remains a realist. You will have noticed that he writes: ***"If it is possible ... live at peace with everyone."*** *If it is possible?* So I am going to try for a week or two or three to live in peace, and if it doesn't work, I am going to give up and then ignore or hate the other person?? No, that is not what Paul is saying. And that is not the way God deals with us.

Paul just realises in a world of sinners, it can happen that *you* make an effort to live at peace with all, but the other person doesn't respond in peace. Then peace is not possible.

But Paul then also adds: ***"As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."*** In others words, "you" are never the one that stops trying. As God himself with us, we try again and again and again to overcome all barriers. We encounter evil, but continue to seek the well-being of the other person.

This is difficult - I know. But this brings us to the second point we need to take note off.

Paul writes: ***"Do not take revenge, my friends... (God says:) It is mine to avenge; I will repay."***

Whenever we repay evil with evil, we have elevated ourselves to the position of a judge. If somebody hits me, and I hit back, I judge. If somebody is unforgiving towards me, and I therefore decide to be unforgiving towards him or her, I judge. Sometimes God gives me a position of judgement, which I then need to exercise impartially. But here Paul addresses our everyday lives.

The problem again is, that we don't always realise, "we" are a "congregation of sinners". One sinner cannot be the judge of another. This is God's task. And the question therefore is: Do I trust God to be good judge?

Fact is, God is a good judge. One day Robert Mugabe will be judged by God. The person who steals my rubber at school, will be judged by God.... I will be judged by God.

My task is not to judge: My task is to love, to forgive. I do not repay evil with evil, but overcome the evil with good.

Friends, we may not be able to change the whole world. Those of us sitting here, may not even be able to influence what happens in Zimbabwe, But you and me, in our small world, we can make a difference. We can be a testimony of God's love. When faced with evil, we don't repay with

evil. When this leads to suffering on our party, we carry our cross willingly.

Evil is never overcome by evil. But when evil encounters love, lives can be changed. I believe it happened to us, when we encountered God's love. It is just a matter now of us practising this love with the people we deal with on a daily basis. May part of the problem today is that we Christians haven't always played the role of the "peacemaker", as we should have. ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God"*** (Mt.5:7). Amen.

Dieter Reinstorf