

SERMON FOR THE 11TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Cape Town - 27 July 2008)

Text: ⁸ On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. ⁹ He set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. ¹⁰ The whole Babylonian army, under the commander of the imperial guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. ¹¹ Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had gone over to the king of Babylon. ¹² But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields. (2 Kings 25,8-12)

As noted earlier on, the topic of this Sunday is called “God and his nation”. With this, the focus shifts to a wider field of God’s rule. Usually we reflect on our personal relationship with God and his dealing with us on a very personal level. But today it is about God and his dealing with a nation: God and South Africa, God and Zimbabwe, God and the UK.

This is indeed a wider exercise in “faith”. Within the political sphere and amongst the political rulers of our day this question about God is not always asked. But we are to reflect on it today.

The text given for this reflection recalls a horror event in the life of ancient Judah - worse than we ever experienced in South Africa or even in neighbouring Zimbabwe.

When these events happened at the beginning of the 5th century before Christ, Israel (the Northern Kingdom) had already been destroyed by the Assyrians. This time it was the turn of the Southern Kingdom, called Judah.

In contrast to Israel, Judah seemed to get a bit of warning. Jerusalem wasn’t destroyed immediately. When the Babylonians under the rule of king Nebuchadnezzar entered Judah for the first time, the king of Israel, called Jehoiachim, immediately surrendered. The Babylonians therefore just deported him to Babylon and made his uncle, Zedekiah king of Judah.

But - and this is where our chapter starts - Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. The consequences - to say the least - were dire. The king send his army general, called Nebuzaradan, with thousands of troops to Jerusalem. The people of Jerusalem, of course, immediately closed the city gates. But the Babylonians had patience. They kept the city under siege for one and half years. They just camped outside the city wall and waited for the provisions in the city to run out.

As you can imagine after one and half years the people in the city were desperate. At this time the Babylonians managed to break through the wall of the city in the north. Despite being surrounded, King Zedekiah managed to escape towards the south. But the Babylonians chased him down. They captured him in the plain of Jericho and turned him over to the king of Babylon.

Sentence was pronounced. They took the sons of Zedekiah and executed them in the presence of their father. They forced Zedekiah to watch. And then immediately afterwards, so that he would be haunted by this vision for the rest of his life, they poked out his eyes and took him in shackles to Babylon.

Thereafter the Babylonian troops returned to Jerusalem. They burned the houses, and even broke the whole wall that surrounded Jerusalem down - brick by brick. The people of Judah had no home anymore.

But the worst of all was: The Babylonians entered the holy temple of God. First they looted it, including the Holy of Holiest, which only the High Priest was allowed to enter once a year. And then they set it on fire. Gone was Jerusalem. Gone was the temple of God.

Similar events happen all over the world all the time. It happened during World War II. Although being a German national, my mother-in-law and her family experienced it as well. They lived on the Polish boarder. First the Nazis came on the way to Poland and Russia, and just took over their house. When they left, the family moved back in again. But a few years later, the German army being defeated, the Russians came through, and chased them out again.

Here on our boarder, in Zimbabwe, the horrendous stories that we hear are but a scratch on the surface. For me personally it is still hard to fathom how it is possible that a country so peaceful and prosperous can be ruined in the short space of 10 years. This week they showed in the Newspaper: With a hundred billion Zim\$ you can purchase three eggs. People are experiencing hurt, hardship and suffering beyond words.

But who reflects about “God” in this situation? And this is exactly where the Bible differs from other historical accounts. The authors of the Bible reflect about *God* and “their” relationship to him in the midst of national catastrophes.

In a passage, as the one we read, we sometimes overlook what is being said about God. Preceding our passage, there are two phrases, that provide a reason for the events that took place in Jerusalem. We read about king Jehoiachim: “***[He] was eighteen years old, when he became king... [and] he did evil in the eyes of the Lord***” (24:9). The exact same words are spoken about king Zedekiah: “***He was twenty-one years old when he became king... [and] he did evil in the eyes of the Lord***” (24:19).

What does this tell us? Although we may not see God, he who rules this universe. And He is the one that speaks judgement over our lives. In fact, there is nothing that happens in history which is outside the domain of God. In the book of the prophet Amos, we come across this rhetorical question: “***When a disaster comes to the city, has not the Lord caused it?***” (3:6), the prophet says.

But the people of Judah just didn’t believe that such a disaster would happen to them. “God has made a lasting covenant with king David”, they said: “This city of David cannot be destroyed!”. But it was destroyed. Furthermore they said: “God promised his presence to this temple”. A promise he kept, of course. But the people used it as an excuse not to repent. Whenever the prophets warned them, they shouted: “***This is the temple of the Lord. This is the temple of the Lord.***”

But God does not seek temples that glorify him. King David already wrote about this. In Psalm 51 he declares: “***O Lord... you do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burn offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart***” (16-17).

That was lacking in Judah. It started with the evil kings, but it seeped down to the people. God was no longer worshipped and glorified for whom he is. “***You shall love the Lord you God above all things!***” was no longer adhered to. And what followed - after years of divine patience - was punishment. Righteous punishment!

Two things, however, are difficult for us to grasp: (1) Some evil rulers never seem to be punished.

And (2) sometimes there are so many “innocent” sufferers.

First, we mustn't believe that death saves evil rulers from punishment. Every person, not least of all those in a position of authority, will give account of his or her life before God. True, here on earth, this judgement does not always take place. Judgement here is but *periodic and symbolic* of that final judgement, which no man will be able to escape. But every man will get his or her turn to stand before God.

Secondly, “yes” thousands seem to suffer innocently. Maybe my children suffer innocently due to the apartheid policies of “my” generation. Likewise others, maybe “you”, suffer - and it makes no sense.

There is no easy answer to this. And I don't have all the answers. But what we do sense is that we live in a fallen world, where there is no real justice.

How do we cope with this? It starts with the realisation that the destruction of Jerusalem was not the last Word that God spoke and it was not the last act of punishment. We turn the clock of history to 500 years later. On Mount Calvary, just outside the rebuilt city of Jerusalem are three crosses. In the middle is a man called Jesus, recognised by many as the very Son of God. He is innocent. No evil ever came from his lips or his hands. But he dies the most gruesome death ever invented. He dies because God wants “our” salvation. He is judged for our sins. The punishment is on him.

This leads us to draw a conclusion. I give this conclusion with words found in Psalm 73: **“God, as long as I have you, earth has nothing that I desire”** (cf v.25). I might suffer sometimes, but if I have God in my life, I need nothing else.

Jesus and his apostles explained this suffering as “bearing the cross”. I willingly bear suffering in this world in the knowledge: My home is not here. There is an eternal home for me in heaven.

But “in heaven”, that is not where I am yet. And God wants me to play a role here on earth where he has placed me. I have a role to play here in Southern Africa, where I live. It is a double role: First, I will not be drawn into the sinfulness of certain rulers. I will stand up for what is right in the eyes of God and repent every time when I fall into the trap of evil. I believe, Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a good example.

And secondly, I will make it into my task not just to moan and to complain about rulers, as those who have no God. I will, as Paul commands : Pray for my rulers **“and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quite lives in all godliness”** (1 Tim.2:2)

Our prayer makes a difference. Amen.

Dieter Reinstorf