

SERMON FOR THE 20TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Cape Town - 28 September 2008)

Text: The LORD said to Moses, "Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. ² Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to me there on top of the mountain. ³ No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain; not even the flocks and herds may graze in front of the mountain." ⁴ So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the LORD had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. ⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. ⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." ⁸ Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped (him). (Ex. 34:1-8)

We have just experienced two weeks of political turmoil in our country. It really started in 2005 when Jacob Zuma, then deputy president of South Africa, was asked by president Thabo Mbeki to step down. Political analysts lauded this as a brave and decisive act against corruption. But the actions of the state and even that of the president himself weren't without reproof. The Polekwane Conference earlier this year provided Jacob Zuma and his supporters the first real opportunity to strike back. And when three weeks ago Judge Nicholson intimated some form of meddling on the part of the state in the Jacob Zuma case, there was no holding back. With no more than 6 months remaining to the next general election, president Thabo Mbeki was recalled from office and sacked as president of South Africa.

That in short is the playing field of the politicians. It is the playing field of this world into which also we are drawn to participate: "*Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth*" (Mt.5:38). The strongest one wins and the looser remains to lick his wounds, waiting for an opportunity - if it should be given - to strike back again.

Our sermon text is about the tension between God and us. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to deduce that we are dealing with "unequal partners". The story of Israel is the story of an almighty God, the creator of the universe, the one and only Lord, who one day out of pure grace and mercy decides to choose a people whom he wants to elevate into a special relationship with himself. This gracious act of God is sealed in the form a covenant. God promises to be the caring God and Father of Israel and in return the people pledge their undivided obedience to Him.

This covenant is sealed with the giving of the "ten commandments". Moses is called onto Mount Sinai, where God hands him the ten commandments written by God himself on two stone tablets. These ten commandments, which we also learned in our confirmation classes off-by-heart, are *10 divine acts of love*. They provide us with a description on how God in keeping his side of the covenant intends to protect us: You shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall remember the Sabbath Day - this way God protects my faith, my possessions, my marriage.

But even as Moses receives these commandments of God, something extraordinary, in fact something quite frightening happens at the foot of the mountain where the Israelites are camped. And when Moses (instructed by God) looks down from the mountain, with the tablets in his hands, he sees the chosen people of God dancing around a golden calf. And they bow down before it and sacrifice to it shouting: "***These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt***".

I am not sure whether you can see it? But at the moment I can see the heart of God tearing in two. The covenant of grace had hardly been sealed and it had already come to an abrupt end.

God's reaction is spontaneous. He shouts: "***These people are stiff-necked***" (Ex. 32:9). And he turns to Moses and (I imagine with a quivering voice) says: "***Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book***" (Ex. 32:33).

It is not a small matter to turn against God. It is not a minor offence to ignore his commandments and place others first and not him. The consequences are dire.

Moses, the servant of God, knows this. His reaction to the rebellion of the Israelites is quite gripping. He is sad and angry at the same time. In fact, for a brief moment, he loses it. He smashes the two tablets just given to him by God on the ground. But his action is not only a sign of disappointment or frustration. In the narrative itself the broken tablets are symbolic of a covenant that has just come to end. The people themselves had destroyed - for ever - a relationship made in heaven. At this point there is an uncomfortable, heart-breaking eeriness in the story that resonates irrevocableness.

But suddenly, and I am not sure how much time had passed (a day, a week, or a month) the silence is broken. There is a voice that speaks again. It is the voice of God. And God says to Moses, his servant: **“Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. (And) Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai”** (v.1-2). If these words don't take your breath away, you haven't understood anything yet.

God makes a new beginning. He doesn't say: “If that is what you people want, another god, then go and learn your lesson”. Instead he intimates: “You have messed up, badly. But I am going to start with you all over again”.

You see, God's faithfulness, clings to his grace despite all hurt that he feels. There is no eye for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth. We read in the book of Isaiah, God saying: **“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed”** (54:10). God does not give up on his people. We can separate ourselves from him, but he doesn't let go of us. People that have messed up, experience God's loving care all over again.

This is the story not only of ancient Israel. It is also the story of God's people today, the church. The words of God then still apply today: **“They are a stiff-necked people.”** The history of the church is one of failure, doubt, unfaithfulness, disobedience, and even scandals that cry out to the heavens. But this is also “your” history. It is “my” history. God, however, does not let go of his people, his church. For whatever reason he speaks again ... and again.

Moses gets the command to chisel out two stone tablets. The first ones he got from God and he carried them down. This time he must carry them up the mountain. Moses doesn't do so, because *he* suddenly has this inner urge to turn to God. There is a divine *command*: **“Chisel out two stone tablets (like the first one's)”**. But this “command” is already Gospel. The two new stone tablets (as yet unwritten) indicate: There is going to be a new covenant.

There is tension in the text. There is a heightened sense of expectation as Moses climbs the mountain again: Can there really be a new beginning? Can a relationship destroyed by sin be healed? Is the grace of God greater than the destructiveness of sin?

Defining sin as a “slip up”, or a “wrong doing” or a “mistake” that has been made, is too little. Every time I ignore a commandment of God, I hurt a *relationship*. And only one thing can restore a relationship, and that is forgiveness. It is not a matter of time will heal the wound, or if I ignore it, the problem will one day just disappear. It doesn't happen, not in a relationship. Destroyed relationships are in need of forgiveness. In fact “forgiveness” is the only thing we *really* need.

As Moses reaches the plateau on the mountain, where the clouds settle, he hears God's voice. He cannot “see” God. That would destroy him forever. God reveals himself through his voice. He reveals his name. In ancient times that is his nature.

And in giving his name, the Lord, God reveals to Moses who he is: First, he is the “compassionate” and “gracious” God. Compassion has to do with the heart. God reminds Moses, that he has a heart. It is a heart that feels. It is a heart that hurts, when God's people sin. But at the same time, it is a heart full of grace that doesn't strike the sinner immediately but leaves room for the sinner to turn back. It is slow to anger

Secondly, God reveals himself as “loving” and “faithful”. By combining these two attributes God alleviates any fear that his love is restricted to certain times and that tomorrow his love may no longer be. No, God is “faithful” *in his love* for a “thousand” generations.

And thirdly, he “forgives” the wicked. Forgiveness is not a feeling, but an act. It is a decision despite the hurt of the heart. God says: “I am going to restore this relationship. I am prepared to forgive”.

The last line of our passage almost seems to contract what we have just heard. God’s revelation to Moses continuous with the words: “**Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.**” This does not mean, that God is not prepared to forgive. But it does mean: Acceptance of God’s forgiveness will be your choice. And it also means: The evil needs to be punished.

For us Christians this evokes the image of Good Friday. On Calvary a cross is raised. On the cross dangles none other than the very Son of God who carries the sins of this world. And the message is clearer than ever: **The Lord, your God, is compassionate and gracious, abounding in love and faithfulness.** And yet, his love does not leave the guilt of his people unpunished. He punishes his Son: That is the pinnacle of love. But he who rejects the Son, needs to bear the punishment himself.

I am not sure what is your reaction to this story of grace. But our sermon text gives us Moses’ reaction.

Moses’ reaction is one of worship. He does not minimise what happened. He does not make promises, which he and the people cannot keep, like: “It will never happen again.” Instead he confirms: “Yes, we are a stiff-necked people”. But he rejoices in God’s grace and worships him - as we as a congregation are called on to do. Amen.

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