

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY ESTOMIHI (Cape Town - 22 February 2009)

Text: ³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." ³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." (Mark 8:31-38)

On this Sunday we are preparing for the Passion Season that lies ahead. As you may know this coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, which marks the 40th weekday before Easter. During this time our primary focus will be on the *cross of Jesus*, his suffering and finally his death on Calvary. But the Passion Season is not only about the cross of Jesus, but also the cross that *we* Christians are called upon to bear as we follow him and the life that *we* lose in the process. All in all, we can call the Passion Season the "Season of Loss". And that is what I would like to reflect on with you today.

Loss or losing something, are words that go totally against our natural grain. In fact, I have just come back from short "bosberaad" with a group of investors, and we are worried about *losing* something. And in general in the Bible if the message is about losing something, we simply reinterpret it in such a way that it appeals to us again.

Let me illustrate with a joke I heard the other day. An farmer called John quit farming and decided to retire in a small village. On arrival he soon discovered that he was the only Lutheran in a town of all Catholics. It didn't bother him too much, but during the Passion Season (which we are celebrating now) an unexpected problem surfaced. Every Friday John had a braaivleis. And the aroma of the braaivleis was getting the best of his Catholic neighbours who didn't eat any meat on Fridays during Lent. So one day they approached him and said to him: "John, you are the only Lutheran in this town and there is no Lutheran Church nearby. We really think you should become a Catholic." John thought about and spoke to the priest and they arranged it. The big day came when John kneeled before the priest. The priest said, "John, you were born a Lutheran, you were raised a Lutheran and now....", he said as he sprinkled some incense over John's head, "...you are a Catholic". John and all his neighbours were happy.

But the following Friday there was again the aroma of grilled beef coming from John's house. The neighbours were perturbed and peeped over the wall to see what was happening. And there John was casually braaing his meat and saying: "You were born a cow, you were raised a cow and now..." he said as he sprinkled some salt and pepper over the meat, "you are a fish".

This is a quite insightful story. As noted before, sometimes when we hear something that does not immediately appeal to us, we simply invent other ways of getting around it. This applies to our theology and understanding of God as well. Our sermon text is the perfect example.

It is preceded by a confession made by Peter. Jesus says to his disciples, "**Who do the people say I am?**" And the answer: "Some say Elijah or John the Baptist or another prophet." And Jesus asks: "Who do you say I am". And Peter, filled with the Spirit of God, stands up and says: "**You are the Christ**". And obviously when he said it, he had certain perceptions of what that meant. He like all Israelites visualised the Christ as the Conqueror who walks into this world and subdues everybody with his immense power.

But Jesus (as we see in our sermon text) immediately provides a corrective. He says to his disciples: "**The Son of Man must suffer... must be rejected... (and) must be killed**". I agree, this makes no sense. Why should the almighty, all-powerful God be subjected to suffering and to death? And Peter does, what you and I would have done in a similar situation. He calls Jesus aside and rebukes him. In others words, he says to him: "Don't talk like that. Your life is one of glory and victory, not suffering and death".

Rightly as we hear the words of Peter, we are reminded of Jesus' temptation in the desert, which is our sermon text for next Sunday. After 40 days the devil comes to Jesus and says: "You are hungry? What is the problem. You have all the power. Why don't you just change the stones into bread?". Or: "You want the people to follow you. That is easy. Just jump down from the temple". And Jesus rebukes the devil. Here he rebukes Peter and says: "**Satan, get behind me ... [you think typically human and not what is divine]**"

This hasn't changed one bit. Like the Pharisees and Scribes we challenge Jesus and say: "Give us a miraculous sign. Then we will believe in you." By nature we human beings are attracted by glory and glamour.

But that is not how God choose to come to us. Let me repeat what Jesus says in

this sermon text: ***“The Son of Man must suffer... must be rejected... (and) must be killed.”*** Why? Because glory and glamour do not expose what is in our hearts. It doesn't lead us to the root cause of what separates us from God. In fact it covers it up. Miracles “excite” us. but the danger is that despite the excitement the evil “heart” within us is never changed.

At the cross of Calvary where Jesus “loses” his life, the world is exposed for what it is, totally evil. But in the words of Jesus: ***“Father, forgive them... (and) it is finished”***, the sin is conquered and new life comes into being.

That is the one side of the story: Jesus bears the cross of Calvary for us so that the evil in our hearts is conquered.

The second side is: Jesus also calls on us to bear “our” cross as we follow him. After rebuking Peter he says to the crowd, ***“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*** Christians a “cross-bearers”.

Now, I can imagine as I talk about the “cross” various things come to mind. I might think of the finger I lost as a “cross” I need to bear. Others may think of family problems. Still others of a huge financial loss.

But these things aren't really the “cross” that Jesus calls on us to bear. The cross has to do with *dying*. Something has to die within me. What needs to die is the “Self”. What needs to die is this inner drive that makes “me” the center of everything. Life is about “me” and me alone. Life is about what “I” can gain, how “I” can profit, how “I” can get my hands on more money, more power, more glory.

That is the way the world works, isn't it? In the world more money, more power, more glory rules. If a successful business person walks into a room he or she is respected and honoured. That is why we walk with our elbows through the world... and yes, in the process we may indeed gain the whole world. But what we cannot gain in this way is the salvation of our soul. For me to gain salvation for my soul, I must let go.

The essence of the gospel - the good news of Jesus Christ - is about loss. It is about dying. And if you hear a Gospel message preached on the radio or on television that does not *begin* with dying it is not authentic. And we hear these messages all the time. And we are *receptive* for them, because that is what our human hearts crave for. We call it a theology of glory or a theology of prosperity: “If

I only believe in Jesus Christ all my wishes will be fulfilled". Yes, many a wish may be fulfilled, but the journey starts with death, with losing something.

Right here many of us have a problem. We have a problem coming to church to lose something. We come to get something. We come to get a blessing. We come to get an encouraging word. We come to get hope for tomorrow and the assurance that God cares for us. And if we feel we are not really "getting" something, we don't want to come to church anymore.

The right attitude is to come here in order to lose something. I come here to lose the "I" that has become so important in my life. I come here to lose my self-centered ambitions that only focus on me, what I gain, and how I can profit. And when I lose it, my hands are suddenly free. Free to love *others*. Free to see the hardships that *others* bear. Free to help where help is really needed.

The word of the cross sometimes seems so harsh. I *must* bear my cross. I *must* let go. But the goal is freedom. The promise is eternal salvation.

Let me conclude with the words of a Scottish Evangelist called Oswald Chambers. He was born in 1874 and came to faith listening to a sermon by Charles Spurgeon. He studied theology but was soon overwhelmed by a sense of emptiness and duty, until he one day realised: The Christian walk is not about fulfilling laws. It is not about achieving something. It is about a person called Jesus Christ, who gave his life for my salvation. And then he wrote: **"Make Christ's salvation the basis of your life... and then consciously let go."** If I know, I am saved by Christ, I can let go. I can let go of any self-centered ambitions. I can let go of worries. I can let go of hatred. And as I learn to let go I find life. That is the way of the cross. And that is the journey we embark on as this Passion Season starts. Amen.

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