

SERMON FOR THE 2ND OF ADVENT (Cape Town - 6 December 2009)

Text: ⁷ Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. (James 5:7-8)

The schools will eventually be closing at the end of this week. And I imagine that one two weeks later most of you will also be taking some time off. This time, however, just *before* the Christmas holidays start, is usually a very tense time. Most of us are tired and our nerves may be reached a breaking point. At work or at home you may overreact and shout at somebody over a matter of little concern. It is clearly a time when one needs to have and to practice more "patience" than ever more.

"Patience" is the topic of our sermon text this morning. The apostle James starts by saying: "***Be patient, then brothers...***" That he addresses only the "brothers" and not the "sisters" as well reminds me of a poem, that goes like this:

Patience is a virtue,
Possess it if you can.
Found seldom in a woman,
Never in a man.

I tend to agree, that in general men seem to battle more with impatience than most women do. But women are not excluded, as highlighted by a quote from the former prime Minister of Great Britain, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher. She writes: "*I am extraordinarily patient, provided I get my way in the end*".

This quote pin points the main cause of our impatience. And it is something we need to reflect on. We lose self-control, start shouting and screaming, when we feel that things aren't going the way, "we" want them to go.

To give you a simple example: I am not somebody that experiences road rage very often. When I travel I am fairly relaxed. If somebody drives slowly in front of me, I can usually wait patiently and eventually when an opportunity is there, I will overtake. But this is definitely not the case when I need to be somewhere at a certain time. If I am in a hurry and somebody drives 40 km/h in a 60 km/h zone and traffic builds up for a half a kilometer, I get rather upset. I sit right on the back of the other car in front of me and when I eventually pass the slow driver I might even point a finger and say a few unkind words. Why? Because it is not going the way, "I" want it to go. The poor soul in the other car, doesn't even know what is bugging me. Luckily, of course, he

cannot hear me.

But how often has it happened, that in a moment of impatience, you say something in anger, and later on when you have caught your breath or noticed the hurt in the other persons eyes, you just wish you could take those words back again.

There is a Chinese proverb that says: "*One moment of patience may ward off great disaster. One moment of impatience may ruin a whole life.*"

So how do I overcome my impatience?

One important step is to distinguish between things you can control and those things that are beyond your control. The slow driver in front of me, I cannot really control. I can shout, I can swear - but it makes no difference at all. It is better to let go and to relax. I am wasting my energy on a thing I cannot really change. Other things I may be able to change. But the "way" I do it is also important. There is a marked difference between firmness in speaking and anger, a difference between reckless shouting and sensible communication.

Here in our passage the apostle James illustrates patience by referring to the farmer. He says: "***See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains.***"

My brother is a farmer. He is not a maize farmer who needs to wait only half a year to harvest his crop. He is in the forestry business. He plants his trees now and he can harvest them at the earliest, depending on the species, 9 to 10 year later. With pine trees he needs to wait 25 or even 30 years. That is patience.

Patience does not mean "in-activity", sitting back and doing nothing. The farmer works. He prepares the field meticulously and plants his crop. He is "very" active. But once "his" part is done, he needs to wait patiently for the rains to come. During this time he can stress and shout, but it will not change the situation. He needs to relax. The growing of his plants is not something that he can control. If he tries, he will cause far more damage than good.

But how do I "learn" this patience? According to James this is not something that just happens, it has to do with your "relationship with God". You see, the farmer in our passage, does not only wait for the rains to arrive. He waits patiently for "God" to provide the rains. His patience is rooted in a "history" that he has "with God". He knows from experience, the God who provided the rain last year, *will* provide the rain this year. Or he knows, that if God provided little rain this year, he will provide better

rain next year or the year their after.

There is a link between patience and God-trust. Do I trust that God is in control of my life? When I am sick, do I believe that he holds me. Do I trust him? When my business take a bit of a dive, do I believe that he controls what is happening? Or when I experience a hardship, do I believe that he can - as he promised - take that hardship and turn it something that will benefit me on the long run?

The problem is that we - even as Christians - tend to forget the past. It was the same with the Israelites when they journeyed from Egypt to the land that God had promised them. This journey wasn't easy. For forty years they traveled through the desert. During this time they encountered many hardships. There were times when they had no water, no food, times when they were attacked by the enemies. But God always provided for them. In between these hardships, however, they forget what happened before. In the face of a new hardship they stressed, they grumbled against one another and even shouted against God. Their impatience was a *lack of trust*. They wanted their problems solved "now". They couldn't wait for God.

One man who was noted for his patience was the great New England preacher, called Phillips Brooks. He was widely noted for his poise and quiet manner in difficult times. But apparently even he at times lost his patience. One day a friend saw him feverishly pacing the floor like a caged lion. "What's the trouble, Mr. Brooks?" the friend asked. Brooks responded: "The trouble is that I'm in a hurry, but God isn't!"

We need to realise, God's timing is not always our timing. In fact, Scripture indicates that postponing help isn't often God's way of "teaching" us patience.

In Deuteronomy 8 we read: ***"Remember how the Lord, your God, led you and test[ed] you in order to see what is in your heart... He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna... to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord"*** (v.2-3). This mean, God sometimes allows things to happen to see what is in your heart. But then he also helps you in order to "teach you patience".

Patience is clearly not something that is learned overnight. It is like building up a muscle. You work at it every day. You may fall, but you get up and try again. The key is, trusting God that he holds your life and that "he" is in control.

Losing our patience with a slow driver or nagging children is, of course, a minor offence with little consequence. However there is one area where patience is especially called for and should never be lost. . And that is in "waiting for the Lord."

That is the context of our sermon text. The apostle James is writing to a congregation being oppressed by others. Satan is making every effort to distract them and to draw them away from God before the immanent return of Jesus.

In the same way Satan is still active today. He will try his best to distract you. More often than not the challenges of your faith will come from *inside* the church itself. You may be hurt by what another member of the congregations says. Your young children might distract you to a point, where church or a time of quiet meditation is last thing on your mind. James encourages “patience”.

Patience in this context is the same virtue as “perseverance”. I persevere in my faith. A direct translation of the Greek word (for patience) is “long-suffering”. In others words: If due to my commitment to God, I am caused suffering, I don’t reach a breaking point early, but I endure for a “long” time.

This patience I can only learn from God himself and the way that he has patience with me. In Psalm 103 we read: ***“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, [and] abounding in love”*** (v.7). We test his patience all the time. But he perseveres. Jesus himself is the model of patience. They strike him on the cheek. He doesn’t strike back. They spit him in his face. He doesn’t spit back. They nail him on the cross, but he prays: ***“Father forgive them, for they don’t what they are doing”***.

This virtue of patience and perseverance God himself wants to give to his children. It is part “fruit” of the Spirit: ***“Love, joy, peace [and] patience”*** (Gal.5:22).

So pray for patience from God. And remember, when you do, your patience will surely be tested. Patience is learned in the life-school of God. He gives us a burden to bear. But he also helps us to carry it. And every time it happens, we learn: There is not need to be impatient. We have a faithful God who is near us. He holds us and keeps us. We can trust him. Amen.