

SERMON FOR 3 ADVENT

(Cape Town - 13 December 2009)

Text: ¹ So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and ambassadors of God's mysteries. ² Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. ³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God. (1 Cor.4:1-5)

As I announced earlier in the service, the topic for this Sunday, the 3rd of Advent, is the "forerunner of the Lord". Initially that was John the Baptist, who was born just a few months before Jesus. It was his task to prepare the people for the coming Messiah.

His sermons were like a "sign". They always pointed away from himself to the one who was about to arrive. One day the Pharisees came to him and asked him why he was baptising with water. This is what he said: ***"I am baptising with water... but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one that comes after me [and] I am not worthy to even untie the thongs of his sandals"*** (John 1:27). That is a perfect example of John pointing away from himself to Jesus.

It is our task today to reflect on the (modern day) forerunners of the Lord, who prepare the people for Jesus 2nd coming. In other words, this sermon is all about the pastors of the church, their duties and our expectations.

The first and main point highlighted by Paul in the sermon text is: The pastors are but "servants" of the Lord and "ambassadors" of God's mysteries.

You will know it better than I do, but sometimes huge expectations are placed on pastors. I remember so well, when as a 28 year old young man, I was called to serve a large German/Afrikaans congregation in Pretoria. The congregation vacant for two years. And by the time I arrived their were enormous expectations: Obviously they all wanted me to be a excellent preacher. Some were worried about my Afrikaans that it wasn't good enough. And they were right, it was terrible. But I was young and energetic, so some expected the youth work to flourish at least. Others expected me to be a good counselor, who shows compassion and empathy for those in need. As children are always important in every congregation, the young parents had their expectations regarding children's work. Others were hoping that I would contribute in the area of music. Needless to say with my lack of rhythm, I really disappointed them.

But every now and again there is a pastor that really “makes it”. He becomes almost an idol in a community - a super star. He is exceptionally talented and gifted. He has charisma! People love him and he attracts people from all spheres of the community. Mention his name, and everybody “knows him”.

In the city of Corinth the apostle Paul, very well-known after his death, was in those days not the “popular” pastor. His lack of popularity had largely to do with the make-up and expectations of the congregation. The people in the congregation of Corinth were themselves exceptionally gifted. A wide range of spiritual gifts manifested themselves amongst them. Some spoke in tongues. Others interpreted them. Some had the gift of healing. Others again had knowledge and wisdom.

But in their own eyes Paul (their pastor) seemed to be a very ordinary man. We know from Scripture, that he didn’t have an aura when preaching. He was just an “average” preacher and pastor, who in that community had to deal with a lot of criticism. Some publically said: “He is not spiritual enough for us”. Others criticised his preaching skills and said: “We wish he would be like Appolos” (the great Greek narrator who had become a Christian).

In our passage Paul responds to this criticism. What are we to expect from the forerunners of the Lord? Paul’s answer is simple: **“They are servants and ambassadors of God’s mysteries”**. Both words, “servant” and “ambassador” indicate, it is not about “them”. A servant is somebody that does what the master commands. And an “ambassador” is one that represents the master. As a country we have ambassadors all over the world. But in most cases we don’t even know their names. Who is our ambassador in Great Britain? Who is our ambassador in the USA? Or in Nigeria or Ghana? Most of us don’t know. Why? Because the ambassador points to the one he represents.

The “forerunner” points to the Lord. It is not about him, his gifts or his talents. He has but one task and that is to point to the Lord. Applied to us: It is not important who the pastor of St Thomas is and that he is well-known in the whole community. The question is: Does he point to the Lord? When he preaches are we attracted to the Lord?

John the Baptist pointed to the Lord. When Jesus one day himself arrived at the Jordan river, John said: **“Look [there] is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”** (1:29). He stepped back and gave Jesus the stage.

The second point Paul makes is: We are ambassadors of God’s mysteries! In other words, the Gospel message which we preach, is not obvious, it is not popular, it is

“mysterious”. That doesn’t mean that it is a hidden secret. Mysterious means: This message does not appeal to the natural human being. Where the Gospel is preached you don’t get general excitement or resounding applause. In fact, Paul says, for the wise it is foolishness. It is about a cross. Somebody that dies for my sins.

Preachers of the cross are hardly ever popular. They don’t make it in this world. Listen to what Paul writes about himself to these “popular” Corinthians. **“God has placed us apostles on display to be condemned.... we are fools for Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are honoured, we are dishonoured. When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure”** (1.Cor.4:9ff).

The forerunner of Christ is never popular. He never draws attention to himself. He points to the Lamb of God.

Comparisons of pastors often lead to judgements: This pastor is really good. And this one is not so good. Paul responds to this by saying to the Corinthians: **“I care very little if I am judged by you.”** That does not mean that Paul is not open to constructive criticism. He definitely is. But the point is: Those in the family of God are not appointed as judges over one another. And when we do judge, it is always one sided.

There is only one judge: God is the judge! And when he judges he applies only “one” criteria. This criteria is “faithfulness”. The question God will ask the pastor is not: Were you a good preacher? Did you capture the attention of the audience? He will ask: “Were you faithful in pointing to me? Were you faithful with the gifts I gave you?”

Dear friends, so far I have only concentrated on the pastor. And that is indeed the focus of this passage. But can this passage be applied to all of us?

I believe it can. You are also “servants” of the Lord. That is the way you should view yourself. In the church of Christ there may be many offices, but there is definitely no hierarchy - the really important people, to whom we should listen, and the less important people. We are all “servants” of the Lord.

That is the attitude that comes from Christ himself who left his disciples with an example of servanthood: He washed their feet. The master became the servant. Likewise we serve one another. Nobody should come to church as a “spectator” who afterwards judges: That was great, or I didn’t get anything out of this service. Rather, when you arrive at church (any church) ask the question: How can I serve

today? There are many ways we can serve: I can greet people as they arrive (even if I am not the usher). I can smile at somebody or say a silent prayer. I can make a flower arrangement for the altar or serve coffee and tea with a smile. Don't leave church without "serving" somebody.

Secondly, you are also an "ambassador" of Christ. You represent him, wherever you are. At home "you" are his ambassador. At work in an environment that may not respect him (which the pastor seldom reaches) "you" are his ambassador. Even at a party, "you" are his ambassador. You bring a Christ-like attitude into every situation.

And the only thing that God expects from you is "faithfulness". But remember faithfulness is not perfection. God knows us. He knows our weaknesses and inner struggles. Faithfulness means: I endure. I don't get tired. Even when faced with hardship or ridicule I remain true to "him", my Lord.

The primary element of faithfulness is not perfection, but direction. Faithfulness means, I am God-focused. I remain faithful to "him".

Our sermon text ends on a very positive note. Paul notes: If we stop judging one another and allow God to be the judge, ***"each will receive his praise from God"***.

Praise? That is not what we always deserve. But God is so different to us. When we judge, we tend to highlight the "bad", the "negatives" in the other person. God sees the good. He sees the good because he looks at us through the cross of Jesus. He looks at us through the eyes of forgiveness.

Therefore, instead of focusing on what others do, right or wrong, let us as forerunners of the Lord focus more on "him", that is Christ and what he has done for us and our salvation. The more we do so and the more we point to "him", the closer we will also be drawn to one another. Amen.

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