

## SERMON FOR NEW YEAR'S EVE (Cape Town - 31 December 2009)

**Text:** <sup>31</sup> If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. <sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." <sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-38)

We have come to the end of the year 2009. It is a good time to be in the house of God and to quietly reflect on the year that has passed.

On the political side we had a most interesting year. In April we had an election in our country and Jacob Zuma was inaugurated as 4<sup>th</sup> democratically elected president of our country. I think for most of us were rather apprehensive about Jacob Zuma taking this office. His past has been littered with one court case after the other defending allegations of rape, fraud, and bribery. But 8 months after his inauguration our country is still standing and is not doing too bad. We have survived an economic melt down better than most countries in this world. With his politics of engagement, Jacob Zuma has been lauded both locally and internationally. He even featured on the title page of the September issue of *Time Magazine* - with a very positive report on him, entitled *The surprising promise of Jacob Zuma*. And who knows, he may indeed "surprise" us.

A totally different story has been the ANC youth league leader, Julius Malema. If I may say so: What a catastrophe! His rhetoric of war has caused an outrage across political party lines, even within the ANC. But for whatever reason no action whatsoever has been taken against him. He is like young bull set loose in a china shop. For me, worst of all is, that he always plays the "race card" - whether it is the Caster Semenya saga or the CEO of Escom resigning.. Playing the race card unfortunately prevents constructive engagement. As you focus on race, you simply cannot address the issue on hand.

Looking at our congregation I believe that thinks went well during 2009. Church attendance has been fairly good. The number of children are growing. Quite a few people got engaged in 2009. And the *spirit* within the congregation has generally been good.

On a personal level things will have varied from family to family. As you look back on 2009 some of you will be happy, others sad. Some of us experienced a loss of a family member, others gained a family member. Economically some of you really had a difficult time in 2009. I know of at least two people in our congregation who lost their jobs or worked reduced hours. Others again sailed through as if there was no economic down turn at all.

Based on your experiences in 2009 some of you will look to the future with confidence. Others will be apprehensive. How will 2010 turn out to be?

In our sermon text the apostle Paul shifts our attention to a different kind of a question. The question is: How does “God” feel about you? And what is *his* assessment of your life?

This is clearly the most important question one can ask. So often we focus almost exclusively on politics, economics and our personal goals and ambitions. But in the process we tend to forget that we are just *journeying* through this life and that one day we will be standing before God.

How does God view your life?

It is possible that during 2009 you registered one success after and that you really feel good about yourself, but that God’s assessment of your life is a “no”. Or it could be that you had a difficult year, characterised by one hardship after the other, but God says a victorious “yes” to your life.

Does God says “yes” or “no” to you? Did you exercise forgiveness, where others would hate? Did you pray, while others gossiped? Did you provide spiritual upliftment to the people around you, or did you draw them away from God?

When I reflect on my own life, I realise that so often even the good I do is shadowed by self-interest. I help people, but at the same time I crave for recognition. Or I tend to stand in judgement over others, like the Julias Malemas and Jacob Zumas of this world, but in my own small world I am often not much better than they are. Or I criticise, but it is negative criticism. I don’t do anything myself to positively and constructively change the situation. I am just an irritating Jack Russel barking on the sideline.

Earnest self-reflection can lead to just one verdict: God must be against me.

But Paul, writing to the Romans, makes an extraordinary statement, which we can term a “foundational truth”. He says: **“God is for you”**. I want to repeat that and say it again: “God... is ... for ... you.”

These words are especially hard to accept when you have been going through a difficult patch in your life. Some time this last week I switched on the TV and I saw they were showing the move “Hansie”, which recapped the life of Hansie Cronje, the former national Cricket Captain.

His life is in many ways such a tragic story. Hansie was right at the top of the world, praised for his playing skills and leadership even by Nelson Mandela. But then came the fall. Indian book makers tempted him with money. He accepted. But when he didn’t throw a game they exposed him.

I think we were all totally shocked when he first confessed to his wrong doing. Most people immediately turned against him. He was banned from any form of Cricket for the rest of his life. He was deemed to be a disgrace to our country - and most probably rightly so. But many were also ready to forgive. But Hansie couldn’t forgive himself. He locked himself in his house, too scared to face the world. For 18 months he struggled with himself. Until out of sheer desperation he went to Durban to speak to Peter Pollock - a Christian himself. Hansie opened up. And Peter told him the parable of the prodigal son. “God is not against you”, he said to Hansie, “He doesn’t hate you. He is just waiting for you to return. He loves you. He is for you.”

Likewise in difficult times (you may have a terminal illness, your spouse dies, you lose your job), you find it difficult to imagine that God is for you. But these things happen in the world all the time. They happened to Paul as well. We sense something of what he experienced, when in our sermon text he writes about **trouble and hardship, persecution and famine, nakedness and sword**. That is what he himself experienced time and time again. He was flogged by authorities no less than eight times, once he was stoned and left for dead, three times he was shipwrecked, and countless times he landed in prison.

But Paul never doubted that God was *for* him. Instead he writes: ***“I am convinced that [nothing] ... is able to separate us from the love God in Christ Jesus (not even death).”***

How can Paul be so sure that God is *for* him? How can he be so sure that nothing can separate us from God's love?

The answer lies in the cross. Paul writes: ***“God is for us... [for he] who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all.”*** He continues and says: ***“Who is he that condemns us?”*** The devil may. We may. But God doesn't. In Christ he loves us.

When there is hardship, he loves us. When our spouse dies, he loves us. When I lose my job, he loves me. When I sin and fall, as Hansie did, he wants to forgive. God is for me. The cross is the sign.

Dear friends, God is *never* the problem. The problem is rather that we are not always open to God. He wants to channel grace and love towards us. But we are not always there to accept. Sometimes we simply rush to much. Other times we are so caught up in our anxieties and pain, that we never become quiet - not even on a Sunday.

To be open towards God means: I allow his love to warm me. I allow his love to transform me. I place myself into his care. Or I cry, but I cry in his presence and the Spirit of God intercedes for me.

You will know that the two most well-known words in Greek for love are *fileo* and *agape*. *Fileo* is the love between friends. It is a give-and-a-take love. You invite me over for supper, and I return the invitation. That is not God's love towards us. His love is *agape*. *Agape* is the unconditional love. It just gives and expects nothing in return.

A well known theologian once said: *Fileo* is the path from man to God. I love God, but I expect something in return (The flip side being, if I don't get the expected I doubt his love). *Agape* in contrast is the path from God to us. It is a love that gives everything with no self-interest, or personal gain. It is a spontaneous and generous love that renews people when they accept it.

We don't know what lies ahead in 2010. But it does not matter. What we do know is that nothing will separate us from God's love. And if we do have a hardship to bear, his love will keep and sustain us.

I pray for openness towards God's love in 2010. I pray that you will be drawn into the presence more than ever before. God is for you! Don't ever forget it. Amen.