

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY INVOCAVIT

(Cape Town - 21 February 2010)

Text: ¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

I have been away for a week and bit, but I heard you had a great service last Sunday when Heindry did the reading. I asked my children what the service was like and they said: "The sermon was great - most interesting, but uncle Heindry preaches longer than you do". I am going to keep it even shorter today as we still have an AGM after our service.

On the Sunday before I left we reflected on the passage that directly precedes this sermon text. The focus was on the *Word of God*. And we heard that the Word of God is like a double edged sword. Meaning it cuts in both directions (it is living and active all the time), and it is so sharp that it penetrates even to divide between body and soul.

It isn't always pleasant when the Word of God cuts so deep. As it cuts, it opens up those deep wounds hidden in our hearts and reveals some of those really nasty and despicable traits that characterise *and* poison our life. I can therefore understand it that some people may say: "I don't want to go to church, I don't want to reflect on the Word of God, because it hurts and exposes some of the evilness long hidden inside.

At our Bible study this week we talked about *how* we react when we are caught doing something wrong or an old sin is exposed. Maggi and myself react quite differently. She would recognise what she did wrong much faster than I do and apologise - which is wonderful. I must confess, I am quite bad. If I get caught out, my first reaction almost instinctively is to justify my actions. I try to talk myself out of it or at times even find a reason to blame somebody else for my wrong behavior. Maybe you do the same. But why do we do it?

The second question we asked was: If you recognise the wrong and really feel bad about it, *who* do you talk to? Do you have a good spouse, or a friend, or a work colleague to whom you can go and say: "Gee, I really messed up, I feel so bad." Who do you talk to? Where can you off-load?

We realised, generally we are drawn to people of whom we know they will not condemn us. There is nothing as bad as opening up to someone and then being judged: How could you do it? Are you stupid? We look for people who understand us, who have been there before. And we look for people of whom we know, no matter what I do, this person is still going to love me.

I find it great, for example, if a child messes up, my daughter in school falls pregnant, and the first person she approaches is the dad or the mother and says: “I have messed up”, and knows, My parents will not condemn me. They won’t approve. But they will never reject me.

Fact is, we are drawn to people that do not judge or condemn us. But unfortunately there are not many around. And there are not many around because we all struggle with our sinfulness. Not even the pastors, or the ancient priests in Israel, managed to fulfil this role of being a compassionate listener well.

The ancient priests had a dual role given to them by God: They had to make sacrifices and that had to intercede for the people of Israel. In other words, if somebody committed a sin, that person would go to the priest with a dove or a lamb and ask the priest to make a sin-offering. And as the priest made the offering and burnt it on the altar, he would pray to God and ask God to forgive this person for his or her wrong doing.

But even the priests messed up. The real sinners were often barred from entering the temple and they just couldn’t let go of their judgmental attitude.

Understandably then and now people are sometimes despondent. If they commit a sin, they don’t know who they can talk to. If they struggle in their faith and doubt begins to overwhelm them, they don’t know who to turn to.

When this letter to the Hebrews was written, people were struggling with their faith. A persecution was looming. As Christian they were being sidelined, ridiculed and even threatened. Many weren’t convinced anymore that being a Christian was worth it. Some of them didn’t gather anymore. In other words, they didn’t go to church. Others were on the verge of losing their faith totally. The problem was, they didn’t always know *who* to talk to. Is there an understanding person out there?

The apostle says: Yes, there is someone you can share every aspect of your life with. If you are sad, you can talk to him. If you are despondent, tell him about it. If you are burdened by something you did wrong, go to him. He *will never* judge you. He understands you.

And that person is “Jesus”. He calls him the “high priest”, in other words, the priest of all priests, the very “Son of God”.

The apostle writes: ***“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are”*** (v.15). This is so true. Before Jesus entered his public ministry, he was led into the desert. There the devil tempted him. He tempted him with honour: Jump down from the temple top, he said, and everybody will follow you! When that didn’t work he tempted him with money: If you will kneel down and pray to me, I will give you all the splendors of this world. This high priests knows

what it is like to be tempted.

He knows what it feels like to be lonely and to be rejected by friends. In the garden of Gethsemane they left him alone. When the soldiers arrived they abandoned him.

On Wednesday, when we had the Memorial Service of Frankie, we heard: “She never feared death. But she did fear that she may lose her faith”. Jesus knows what that is like. In the garden of Gethsemane he struggled so much with his faith, that the sweat from his face dropped to the ground like drops of blood.

Whatever you experience, even death, he has been there. He knows how difficult it can be at times to keep your faith.

So if you are looking for somebody with “understanding” be reminded: There is this high priest called Jesus. You can approach him any time of the day or the night. You may not hear his voice, but be assured he is there.

Come to his “throne”. Oh no, you may think, we are scared of people on thrones. Aren’t those the kind of people who judge us? No, not this one. Listen to what the apostle says. He calls this throne, the “*throne of grace*”. This is the place where you experience “grace” and “mercy”. If you come to him, he doesn’t lash out. On the contrary, he takes you into his arms and cuddles you against his heart, a heart that beats nothing else but grace and mercy.

This week we entered the Lenten Season. This is the season during which we focus on the passion of Christ, that is, his suffering and death. The intent is that we begin to understand the heart of God. Unfortunately the “Sundays” aren’t really part of the Passion Season. But in our Bible studies we will this year cover the passion narrative according to the Gospel of Mark. You are welcome to attend.

We talked about Christ being *the* high priest. But there is also such a thing as the “priesthood of all believers”. In other words, God wants all of us to be a priest to one another. As we heard, we don’t always manage well. But we can grow. I want to encourage you, be a priest to others. That means, be an instrument of God’s grace and mercy to others. For this to happen you first need to open up to the high priest. Share your life with him. Accept his forgiveness. Accept his mercy. And when people do approach you never judge them. And if you have categorised people, those you like and those you don’t really like, just stop it. Be there for all, because Christ is there for all.

In summary, listen again to what the apostle says: “*Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy.*” And having received mercy, be merciful. Amen.