

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY QUASIMODOGENITI

(Cape Town - 11 April 2010)

Text: ³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9)

I would like to consider this Word of God today within the context of the political arena in our country. I realise it is difficult for a pastor to do so, because it could seem as if he is supporting the one or the other political party. But this is not the case. And despite the danger of being misinterpreted, I do believe that the Gospel needs to be preached into our every day life, including our political context.

What we saw on TV in the last week was in many ways very disconcerting. First, there was the murder of the AWB leader, Eugene Terreblanche. I don't think anybody here supported his policies or his ideology. But *that* this man was murdered and also the *way* that it happened, was shocking. We don't really know the reasons yet (and there is much speculation), but *nothing* justifies a murder.

What this murder, however, did reveal was that there is still a lot of racial tension in our country. It was epitomised by the "racial debate" held on e-tv on Wednesday evening. It ended in a debacle, the AWB representative storming out the studio, threatening his debating partner and almost coming to blows with the presenter. It was sad to see. On a lighter note: I saw that his line: "Do not touch me on my studio" has become quite a hit on the Internet.

However equally sad and even more disturbing to me was the news conference hosted by the ANC Youth leadership on Thursday. A BBC reporter said something that the youth leader clearly didn't appreciate. He lost his cool. I don't think I have ever heard such abusive language on TV - and that by a young man (a bit older than my children) who is being groomed to be a future leader in our country.

For me this was quite scary, despite the fact that he did apologise later on. But I know my history and I know what can happen in a country when millions of people are poor and live in appalling conditions. Germany after World War I is an example. I was in the church museum in Philippi the other day and I saw a 200 million Mark bank note. I had already forgotten that after World War I the inflation rate in Germany was just as bad as in Zimbabwe. But fact is, when people are poor and are struggling to survive they can be exploited by charismatic and self-serving leaders. They pin their hopes on them. But if these leaders are not humble and "serving" and do not care for "all" people without prejudice, the end result is always the same: Millions of people suffer.

We experienced it in our country during the apartheid era for which I as a white South African am still sorry. But I do believe, there are new threats on the horizon. The events of this past week testify to this. And I wouldn't be surprised if many South Africans of all races feel very uncertain about their future right now.

The question I am posing today, however, is: What does it mean to be a follower of Christ in this situation? Or, in what way does our faith help us to make a difference in our country?

First let me explain, that the context of our sermon text in some ways relate to our situation here. The 2nd half of the 1st century was for all Christians extremely volatile. Initially the Christians were part of the Jewish religion. They went to the Synagogues to worship and they were accepted - maybe not in Jerusalem - but in the greater Roman empire. But it all changed when the Jews separated from the Christians. The Christians were blamed for most uprising and the Romans banned them from exercising their faith.

Almost overnight the future of the confessing Christian wasn't only bleak, it was pitch black. The Roman authorities were ruthless. And in contrast to the Judean authorities in Jerusalem they had the man-power to hunt the Christians down wherever they went. For many there was no hope for survival. Maybe you are despondent today, but believe me, the situation amongst the Christians in the first century was worse than anything we can imagine. They lived in constant fear.

But listen to the way the apostle Peter starts this letter. He writes:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

And he continues and says: This hope that we have, based on Christ's resurrection, is a hope that can *"never perish, spoil, or fade"*.

First, this means: Our hope is not rooted in this world. Yes, I pray for good leadership in our country - the apostle Paul even commands us to do so (and I hope that you do). But our hope is not based on this or that "man" to provide us with a future. A person that places his hope on another human being (providing celebrity status) is like a reed in the wind or like a boat on a stormy sea: Then your hopes are up, then they are down.

Our hope is based on the God who resurrected Christ from the dead. What this means is: If I belong to this God, I have a future - and nobody can take that away from me. There are stories of Christian martyrs whose eyes shone while they were being burned on the stakes, puzzling their persecutors. But their eyes shone because their hope stretched beyond this world. They knew: God was waiting for them. And this glory nobody could take away from them.

There is this story of a cancer patient who hadn't been informed about the severity of his condition. One day a visiting doctor made the rounds in the hospital and casually (after examining the patient) said: "I assume you realise that you won't live out this year". The man was shocked. He was distraught. He stormed into the office of the hospital director and said: "This doctor just took away my last hope". And the director looked him into the eyes and lovingly said: "My friend, it is time for you to find a *new* hope".

The apostle Peter had this new hope entrenched in his heart. He wasn't always like that. There was a time when his hope was clearly rooted in the things of this world. Marching with Jesus into Jerusalem, he and his fellow disciples were all baying for worldly glory. But when in the Garden of Gethsemane their worldly hope faded, they all turned into deserters, deniers and betrayers.

When Jesus rose again and found his crying disciple, Peter changed. Never ever was his hope entrenched in this world again. It was firmly rooted in heaven.

Why is this important? It is important because people with no hope turn into useless human beings. People with no hope can make no difference in this world. Their lives are characterised by self-pity and self-preservation. Christians with faith in the living Christ have this uncanny, divine ability to rise above personal trials and to provide comfort and help to others. Jesus did even on the cross. When he saw his mother and the disciple he loved, he said to her: **“Dear woman, here is your son”** (Jn.19:27). And to the disciple he said: **“Here is your mother”**. He cared because his hope extended beyond the grave. And likewise we Christians make a difference in the society in which we live, because we have a “living hope” through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the first point.

The second point Peter makes in this dire situation is this - he writes: **“These (trials) have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold... be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed”** (v.7).

What does this mean? Clearly it isn't God that brings these trials upon his people. But when they do come, and God's people suffer, God is not helpless. Instead he uses the suffering to “refine” our faith. Peter compares it to the process of cleaning gold through fire. By means of fire you melt all the dirt and useless rock away and what then remains is the pure, shining gold.

The same happens to us in difficult times. Only then it is revealed where you are standing with your faith. Jesus took Peter through such a process of refinement. As a young disciple of Jesus, Peter clearly overrated himself. He was arrogant. When Jesus during the last Supper said to his disciples: **“[Today] you will all fall away!”** (Mk.14:27). Peter declared: **“Even if all fall away, I will not!”** But his faith was like straw. An innocent servant girl made him fall that very same night. He denied even knowing Jesus. And it was only after Peter recognised the terrible state of his faith, that Jesus could rebuild it.

The same is true for us. Trials in life expose the state of our faith. It is easy to have faith if everything works well and the future is secure. But suddenly your great investment loses value, and you cannot think of anything else but your loss. Or your friend steps on your toe and you battle to forgive. Or somebody accuses you wrongly, and you lose your cool.

And then you have a choice to be either a Judas or a Peter. The one ran away and hanged himself. The other allowed Christ to find him. And when he found him, with his heart hurting, he rebuilt him in to the greatest of all apostles, who brought much glory and honour to God in difficult times. This refining of our faith is an ongoing process. If we just allow God, he uses difficult situations to make our faith brighter than gold.

So, are you despondent about South Africa? I am quite sure some of you will feel very despondent. And if your hope is rooted only in this world, you have good reason to feel despondent. But God wants to change it. Through his Word, and you do need to hear it regularly, he wants to transform your life and give you a living hope through the resurrection of Christ.

And if you have that hope, you will make a difference wherever God has placed you - a difference of mercy. And you will bring honour and glory to his name. Amen.