

SERMON FOR THE 2ND LAST SUNDAY (Cape Town - 14 November 2010)

Text: ¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Romans 8:18-25)

The topic of the Sunday is called the “Last Judgement”. It is quite difficult to see how this sermon text relates to this topic because invariably when we think about the last judgement we think of something that happens right at the end of time. But judgement is something that is in progress all the time. Strictly speaking it started already on that day when Adam and Eve turned their backs on God. From that day on humanity and creation were just not the same anymore. In fact, they are in constant decay moving towards death.

If you doubt this you just need to open the newspaper. Let me illustrate by using the “Cape Argus”. The newspaper I brought along today is that from Wednesday. It wasn't a bad one. The headlines were quite mild if I think of some of the previous headlines. But these headlines were nevertheless quite disturbing. The main headline reads: **“City (Cape Town) is stab capital of SA”**. When I read this I was almost happy that I am relocated to Pietermaritzburg. But can you believe it, our beloved city of Cape Town, which is always lauded as the greatest city in our country, has more deaths by stab wounds than any other city in South Africa. It is shocking. Why in the world do you stab somebody in the first place? But here in Cape Town at least 3 people are stabbed every day.

Further down on the same is a photo of lovely young lady, called Inge Lotz. The name sounds very German. But this young lady, 21 years old, a student at Stellenbosch University, was beaten to the death with a hammer in her very own flat a few years ago. Why would a person do this? She was a young, helpless lady and hardly a threat to anybody.

If you turn to the inside page you have these “normal” stories of state corruption, the rape of a nine year old girl, and sex charges against schoolboys being dropped because the police bungled the arrest and never made an effort to gather the evidence needed to make a conviction.

I tell you, it is getting really bad and the human race is on steep downhill slide. People are crying and groaning and all the more so more because the evilness out there often causes pain to people that seem to be innocent bystanders. Maybe we belong to the more lucky ones - nothing *really* bad has happened to us. But

others in dire straights view us maybe as greedy, self-centered, and destructive beings. Fact it, man is in decay.

But do you know who groans as well? Creation groans. It doesn't do so all the time. Some times the elements of creation **"declare the glory of God"** and **"proclaim the work of his hands"** as we read in Psalm 19. Or listen to this verse from Psalm 98: **"The rivers clap the hands and the mountains sing together for joy"** (v.8). Isn't that wonderful? But that is not what we read in our sermon text. In our sermon text we read that creation **"groans as in the pains of childbirth"** (v.23). It is like a bearing mother screaming in pain.

And we see this decay around us all the time. There are icebergs today where you never saw them before. With the extra heat the hurricane forces are stronger and more destructive than ever before. "Tsunamis", a word we hardly knew half a century ago, is becoming quite a regular phenomenon. Nature is hurting. And do you know why? Because we human beings mess it up all the time. In our greed we take what we want to enrich ourselves. We fill the earth with houses, far more than we need. Rain forests a de-forested and desert areas are growing as fast as the high rising buildings in our cities.

From a biblical perspective this is all part of "judgement". God being pushed to the sideline, man himself now deciding what is good or evil, invariably chooses evil all the time.

And what about us Christians? Well, we groan as well. The apostle Paul is very realistic about this. He opposes any theology that intimates that ones you have committed your ways to God and are a truly "reborn Christian" then the world changes for you and you live your life on "cloud nine" all the time. People believe this. They believe God promises his people a life on earth marked by spectacular bliss. If you are sick, you will be healed. If you are poor, your business will boom. This is so attractive, but not real. And indeed it is not in line with what God has promised.

The greatest illusions of this world are created by money. The more money we make, the more we believe than we can safeguard our life. And indeed the more we believe that, the more we are drawn away from God... and inevitably became agents of destruction.

So this is a doom and gloom sermon! No, not at all. There is something that characterises us Christians that is more than all the money of this world can buy. And this is HOPE! It runs deep down in our soul. It doesn't take the groaning and the pain that we sometimes feel away. But it is there.

Hope is an extraordinary thing! It is more important than you believe. You take hope away from a person, and the person just dies. It happens to the rich when they get older. They realise: "I have build up an empire for myself to last a million

years, but the hope of life is gone". And they die.

What characterises us is HOPE. Just listen to these lines of hope in Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians. He writes: **"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; (we are) perplexed, but not in despair, (we are) persecuted, but not abandoned, (we are) struck down, but not destroyed"** (4:8-9).

This frustrated the Roman persecutors in the first few centuries to no end. In the 2nd century after Christ lived a man called Polycarp. He became the bishop of the church in Smyrna. The persecutors decided to make an example of him. They dragged this old man into the arena and threatened him with death by "wild beast" if he did not recant his faith. He responded: *"For 86 years I have been Christ's servant and he has done me now wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me"*. The Consul shouted: *"If you despise the beats, I will cause you to be consumed by fire"*. And Polycarp said: *"You threaten me with fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgement to come... Come do what you will"*. When they prepared to nail him to the pole, he said: *"Leave me, for he who gives me power to endure the fire will help me to remain in the flames unmoved."*

That is what hope does. And we have hope. Our hope is not bound to this earth: More money, more worldly peace, more riches. Our hope is eternal.

The non-Christians respond: "That is an illusion. Heaven or eternity with God is a Christian crutch. I don't need it. I live my life now. I take what I want and I will enjoy every moment".

But what "we" have is *not* an illusion. It is based on a true story. It is the life story of Jesus. He came into this world. The world did not recognise him. He died alone. But then already the Roman centurion guarding the cross noted something special and said: **"Surely, this man was the Son of God"**. And he was right. Death couldn't hold him. He rose again. He appeared to his disciples and they realised: "Death has been conquered". The evil that holds and controls this world, will *not have the last say*. One day, when we die, we will get a new, glorified body and even creation, destroyed by us, will be restored again to its original beauty. This is what we read in Revelation 21. John writes: **"I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them... He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain'"** (1-4).

Question is: Do you believe this? Unfortunately it is a belief that we can not make. It is the Holy Spirit in us that confirms it. He creates this hope.

The essence of hope is, that it is something that is *not* seen. Paul says: **"Hope that is seen, is no hope at all"** (v.24). But that is what we always we want. We

want to “see”. God’s power and might must be manifested, otherwise I cannot believe and be a Christian. No, the seeing comes later. Now we believe. I believe the world with all its evil has been conquered. I believe, death will not hold me. I believe that I am saved, although I carry the scars of my sins on me.

The promise of God to us is not that the world will become a better place, or that the pain and suffering that we experience will stop. His promise is twofold: (1) He will create a new earth and new heaven, and (2) while we are in this world, he will be with us always.

That is why we Christians never give up. We experience pain and disappointments, but there is always hope. And because we are the carriers of hope, that is why we are a “light of the world”.

The newspaper headlines make me sad, but they don’t get me down - because I know the victory is ours. And because I know it, I don’t become too despondent, or too morbid about life. It is because we have hope, that we can make a difference in this world. Think about it. That is your task. You have a future. But you don’t live in the future. You live now and you make a difference in their lives of others, even to creation. You do so because you are a carrier of hope.

It is a hope founded on one man: Jesus Christ. He loves me. He died for me. He rose for me. And nothing will separate me from his love. And it is true what Paul says: **“Our present suffering are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us”** (v.18). Amen.

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