

**SERMON FOR 1 ADVENT**  
(Cape Town - 28 November 2010)

**Text:** "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness (Jer.23,5-6).

We have just started the Advent Season. The word itself means "arrival". In this time of the church year we reflect on the "arrival" of Jesus, but we do so in a dual sense. On the hand we reflect on the announcement of his birth in Bethlehem many years ago. But on the other hand there is also this joyful anticipation of a *future* event, when Jesus will return for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time.

Our sermon text today is taken from the Old Testament, and indeed it is a most interesting passage. But for you do understand it, let me give you some background on what happened during the time of the prophet Jeremiah. At that time the northern state, called Israel, no longer existed. The Jews were concentrated in the south, in the state called Judah with Jerusalem as its capital. The king of Judah was a man called Zedekiah. But Zedekiah, as most kings before him, was as corrupt as can be. Ironically his name means: "God is my righteousness". But there wasn't a righteous bone in his body. He had no trust and no fear of God. And during his reign he just exploited his people to enrich himself.

One day Jeremiah spoke to him and warned him about the consequences of his godless life. For his trouble he was thrown into prison and tortured. But it wasn't long after that, that the Babylonians under king Nebuchadnezzar prepared to attack Jerusalem. While the army camped outside the city wall, Jeremiah pleaded with Zedekiah to submit to the Babylonians in order to save his people. But by that time Zedekiah was so vain and blinded by his apparent power, that he decided to *resist* the Babylonians. The consequences were dire. The Babylonian soldiers stormed Jerusalem, destroyed the city, and burnt the temple to the ground, and scattered the people of God. Those who weren't captured and taken into Babylonian exile (which were primarily the elites), just fled over the borders to save their lives.

It reminds me a bit a bit of what happened and is still happening in our neighbouring country, Zimbabwe. When I flew to Germany this past week, I did something that I don't often do: I bought a book to read at the airport. I became aware of the title of this book, when about two weeks ago I watched the e.tv programme called: "Judge for yourself". In this particular programme Judge Dennis Davis was in conversation with a man called Peter Godwin who had just published the book called THE FEAR, with the under title: The last days of Robert Mugabe.

I don't think any book ever shocked me more than this one. It captures what happened in Zimbabwe in the aftermath of the 2008 elections clearly won by Morgan Tsvangirai of the MDC. (Movement for Democratic Change). For about 6 weeks the results were kept back. In this time Robert Mugabe, apart from massaging the votes in his favour, unleashed a vicious attack on the opposition. It soon became clear he was never going to relinquish his power voluntarily. His so called "war vets" (a group of youth militia) were instructed to "teach the people where to make their X (cross)". These so called "training courses" consisted of burning down houses, raping women, and clobbering people with sticks and pipes. The tactic was one of "hit and release". You torture people and release them back into the community to show what happens to those who vote for the "wrong" party. The people of Zimbabwe scattered. More than two million crossed the border into our country and still do. Hundreds if not thousands were gruesomely murdered in the process.

This is a fitting analogy to our sermon text. Jeremiah, speaking for God, announces in chapter 23: **"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture"** (v.1). The implication of this verse is: Kings are supposed to be good shepherds, called by God, to care for his people and to provide for them. But instead, driven by greed and corruption, these leaders scatter God's people. Joy and peace, a life tranquility (as intended by God), are supplanted by fear, agony, and unbearable anguish.

But - and this is the point Jeremiah makes - even in the darkest hour there is always a light shining.

Our country South Africa may not be Zimbabwe, and the things that happened there may (God forbid) never happen here. But that does not mean that on a personal level, you have not experienced injustice or experienced dark hours in your life, gripped by fear and anxiety.

The question I am posing today is: Do you know the light that is shining?

In those dark hours, many years ago when the Jews were in exile, Jeremiah made a promise. It was a word given to him by God. It reads:

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land... (and) he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness" (23:5-6).

The name of this king obviously alludes to that of king Zedekiah, who never lived up to his name: "God is my righteousness". But this future king, with the name: "The Lord Our righteousness" will fulfil what his name promises.

It is no secret that the Jews in exile waited many years for this prophecy to be fulfilled. In fact a whole generation died. After 70 years their children returned to Jerusalem, but there was no king that truly gathered God's people or did justice to this name. If people in this time became despondent or even disillusioned in God it can be understood.

But God keeps his promises. The problem that we have is that his promise is often realised in a remarkably different way than expected.

In fact the king (Our righteousness) arrived and went again... and many didn't even notice. And the great majority never experienced the joy and the freedom he brought.

We today *know* who was the fulfillment of this prophecy. It was Jesus, the man from Nazareth, called by some "The king of the Jews". When he lived amongst his people the crime and injustice did not abate. Strictly speaking there was no real change on the political front. One corrupt and ego-driven king replaced the other. King Herod, who instructed the "child murder" in Bethlehem shortly after Jesus' birth, was replaced by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. But in some ways he was even more cruel than his predecessor. In Luke 13 we read that Pilate once slaughtered a group of Galileans while they were making sacrifices to God in the temple so that their blood mingled with that of the animals.

But exactly "in" this time God fulfilled his prophecy. In Galilee was a man, the son of a carpenter. He was, as the prophecy said, a "branch from David". But he didn't live in a palace. On the contrary, he didn't even have a house. He lived with the poor and the marginalised, the sick and the helpless. And those who gave him access to their lives, those who allowed him to touch them, he gave peace and joy.

It was, however, a peace and a joy *in tension*. We sense some of this tension in the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God... Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted... Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God (Mt.5:3ff).

"The Lord Our Righteousness" never promised total fairness and justice "in this world". His name is not political, but describes our relationship to God. Righteous is the one who is righteous *before* God. And that is the primary question: Are you righteous before God? Robert Mugabe may be one of the richest men in this world. But what is his standing before God? "You" may suffer injustice or struggle with illness. But that is all temporary. The question is: Are you righteous before God?

If you attain this righteousness, there is peace and joy no matter what this world offers. In fact it begins to dwarf what otherwise tends to occupy our minds, be it coping with excessive pain or the senseless ambitions of material wealth or power. It is *in Him* that we find peace.

But this righteousness is not “attained”. It is not a goal that God sets before our eyes for us to achieve. It is a gift. As Jeremiah said: “He” is our righteousness.

Advent is the season when God set this plan into motion. He announced the coming of his Son. He came, but he did not replace Herod or Pilate on the throne. Instead he died on the cross. His death was a sacrifice for the sins of this world. Life is all about “accepting” what God gives.

And indeed one day, he will return. We call it his 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent. Then he will come as a judge. Those who tortured and scattered his people, without repentance, will be judged. But you and I will also be judged. God will ask you about your ambitions. He will ask you about your reverence towards him. He will ask you about your neighbour, your congregation, your church and whether you served Him willingly.

And then nothing will be more important than “The Lord Our Righteousness”. It is not *my* righteousness. I dare not stand before this God alone. What I need is Christ to stand next to me and in front of me. What I need is somebody who says: “He was terrible. But I loved him and I paid for his sins.”

“The Lord is your righteousness”. People that have been touched by this Lord may not be spared the indignity of injustice and suffering, but the peace and the joy of God in their hearts overflow. And they are the ones that make a difference where God has placed them.

It is my wish that you will join me during this Advent season, so often pushed aside by busy schedules and fatigued bodies, in praying what is the watchword for this week: **“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation”** (Zech.9:9). Amen.