

Sermon: Last Sunday of the Church's Year (24th Sunday af. Pent).

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:20-18 (vv. 25, 26)

Theme: Jesus reigns!

Goal: To comfort people with the assurance that Christ reigns and the final victory is His, in spite of the threats of the foes.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: When we look around us and watch the news, it seems that the church doesn't play the same role in the society anymore, as she used to play. The basic principles of the church like family, morality, honesty and others have been put down and ignored by the new generation and even by some churches as well. The advance of some of the historical enemies of Christianity, like the Islamic State and other radical groups, which are killing hundreds of innocent people and are persecuting Christian Churches, scares me a lot. Epidemics, like Ebola, are carrying lots of people to the grave. - Where is God's powerful Kingdom promised by Christ? Is God still in control? Does God play any role in the world's history nowadays?

Paul answers these and other questions showing what is happening on the stage "behind the curtains". We cannot see it now, and we are still watching some scenes, being emotionally and sometimes physically affected by the play. But the last chapter of the tragedy is already written. And, as sometimes happens in movies or theatres, the end will be glorious and victorious! The hero always wins!

I – The battle goes on

The books of Daniel and Revelation were written when God's people were suffering a very hard time. The enemies were showing all their power and oppressing God's people. These two books, of difficult understanding, have as their main goal to show the battle that goes

on between God's enemies and God's people. They paint the battle in a very dark and bloody colour, encouraging the faithful to persevere in their faith in the midst of the hard battle. They shall not look just to the dead falling at their side, but look to the Commander in Chief, who leads the battle, encourages His army and will win the final battle.

Paul wrote in our text: "For He (Christ) must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death".

Christ is still reigning and the battle goes on. Heaven is not here on earth. But the fact that we are seated in a church, worshipping our God, wouldn't be possible if Christ was not reigning. The religious freedom we enjoy and the fact that the Christian Church is still growing a lot, especially in some countries in Africa, is the good side of the coin and shows His Kingdom among us.

The old apostle Paul wrote to Timothy at the end of his life: "I have fought the good fight" (2 Tim 4:7). Christian life is not that easy as some people imagine it, thinking only about prosperity and advantages. As we fight for the daily bread, studying and working, we have to fight for our faith as well, struggling with temptations, laziness and other issues, holding firm with our co-fighters. The Lord's Prayer is intended to encourage us in this battle, as Jesus Himself taught us to pray: "Thy kingdom come... And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

II – The victory is assured

The life of our Commander in Chief, the King Himself, was not an easy one. And He didn't promise an easy life for His followers. On the contrary, He always warned His disciples against the enemies and encouraged them to remain faithful to the very end, because the reward is great and assured! He Himself apparently was defeated by

the enemy when He was hung on the cross. But Easter Sunday showed who the strongest is. Even death couldn't maintain Him in the grave! The resurrection of Christ is the big issue in this Chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians. It's a long chapter, with 58 verses, all about the victory of Jesus over death. He won, but we are still subjected to death. Therefore Paul writes: "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

We are still under Adam's curse. "Death came through a man"... and: "in Adam all die." We have to pass through this experience, as Jesus Himself passed. "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruit of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. Then the end will come."

Revelation says that when the end comes, "Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire." When the battle is over, even death will not exist anymore. Therefore death is called "the last enemy". The resurrection of Jesus, the firstfruit, assures us that it will be a bigger harvest: our resurrection as well.

III – The King reigns forever

One of the favourite classics is the Alleluia of Hendel. It is told that when it was performed for the very first time, the King of the United Kingdom was among the audience and he stood up in honour of the resurrected Christ. And the choir sings several times: *And He shall reign forever and ever, Alleluia, Alleluia!*

We believe *in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting*, as we confess every Sunday. We cannot see the Kingdom of God in its fullness here, but we believe that Jesus is the King and that the last victory belongs to Him and His elected. The Gospel of Matthew

25:31-46 presented the King coming in His glory with all His angels to separate the righteous from the unrighteous. His words comfort us when he invites: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” Then we will see the King seated on His throne and will enjoy His Kingdom in full forever, without any struggle and battle anymore. God will be all in all! We praise the Lord at the end of every Lord’s Prayer, confessing our faith: *For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*

Conclusion: Christ, the King, is celebrated on the Last Sunday of the Church’s Calendar, before we begin with the new cycle: The birth of the King. In spite of the apparent defeat of the Christian Church, as I portrayed it at the beginning of the sermon, the victory has been won by the resurrected Christ. While the battle goes on, our King nurtures us in the fellowship of His army with the Bread of Life, - His Word, and with His own body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. He encourages us with His love, not with harsh words of command full of hatred and violence as we watch the enemies fighting with their armies; because His Kingdom is a kingdom of peace and love. Do not accommodate yourself in idleness or distract yourself with issues far from the battle field. “Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith... Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”

(Hebrews 12:2, 3). And we rejoice with Paul at the end of this Chapter 15: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O Death, is your victory? Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain” (vv.

54-58). Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 23 November 2015