

Ephesians 5,15- 20

18 after Trinity 2014, Hillcrest

In this letter, which might have been intended as a “circular letter to various congregations” Christians are challenged to live their faith, despite difficult circumstances:

15Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, 16making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. 18Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, 19speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, 20always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear congregation,

When I first heard about it I was sure that it is a scam. It costs quite an amount of money, is very bulky and not pretty. They call it a heat pump. It is supposed to warm a house more efficiently than electrical heating.

But it did not make sense to me. How can this thing “pump” heat from outside, where it is 0°, and inside it releases airflow at 23°? Surely it was just a clever sales gimmick, and inside this bulky machine there basically is a big electrical heater that does the job.

Yet the owner assured me that it works. His house is pleasantly warm in winter, and his electricity bill substantially lower than with electrical heating.

Others confirmed this. And so I did some research. Basically a heat pump is doing exactly the opposite to a fridge. There the system removes the heat from the small compartment and releases it through the radiator at the back of the fridge. With a heat pump the system removes heat from the outside and releases it into the house.

And the system works even at temperatures of -10° C. Incredible. But it works.

In the passage from Ephesians the Christians are called to be “heat pumps” in society.

“The days are evil”, it states. When describing the times that the first Christians experienced, there are things that we do not encounter nowadays - persecution, hate attacks - although Christians elsewhere do have to suffer these. Other issues

are similar: moral decline, unethical behaviour, corruption, fraud - these are not new.

And there are things that we have to live with, that are new to our time: cyber crime, tax evasion, traffic violations. Some things we find repulsive, others we might join doing without giving it much thought. “Every body does it”.

Then there are the specific challenges of our South African situations. Power outages, water shortage, postal strikes, lack of service delivery, petty crime, house breakings, car theft, robbery, armed robbery, attempted murder, violent crimes. The attack on Dean Ron Kusel on Monday is just one small example of what hundreds of citizens have to endure every day. “The days are evil”.

What do we do about it, how do we react to this?

“Make the most of every opportunity” the text challenges us. “Be careful, then, how you live”.

It is so easy to get sucked in by all the negatives, to either become part of the problem, or at least be overcome by the negatives.

To speak in the image of heating: When the temperature outside gets cold, the house too cools down and becomes unpleasant to live in. When temperatures are moderate, we can open doors and windows, enjoy the fresh air and the comfortable temperatures. But when it gets too hot, or too cold, we close all doors and windows to stay as comfortable as possible. But at some stage even that does not help. Then we need the help of heaters.

Similarly, when things go well in life, when there is peace and calm, and the economy is running well, it is pleasant to be a Christian. We live with “open doors and windows” and are not challenged or threatened by society, nor do we need to challenge it. But when it becomes unpleasant, as illustrated with the circumstances above, the natural reaction is to “close up” - to withdraw into my comfort zone for as long as possible - be it my personal faith, or my wonderful congregation. But this passage challenges us to take a different approach.

Just as brilliant engineers then manage to draw heat from the cold climate - against all odds - and make the house liveable, so we as Christians are challenged to make the most of our situation and turn things to the positive.

This is easier said than done - but it is possible. Ephesians 5 gives some very important pointers in this regard.

The whole letter keeps reminding us that we are different, because we belong to Christ. Through Christ we are able to cope and bring meaning into life, even under difficult circumstances.

“Understand what God’s will is ... be filled with the Spirit” .

To put it differently: The biggest challenge to us is to filter our experiences through prayer, to discuss them with our Lord.

In a heat pump there is a substance, a gas, that manages to take up the warmth even from sub zero temperatures, and , through a cycle of compression and expansion, release it into the home.

When we take our misery and fears, our “sub zero temperature” to Christ, he can help us to see things differently, to forgive and be forgiven, to hope, to try again. Christ has this wonderful ability to let us see things in a different light. He has the wonderful ability to forgive and heal, to give hope and joy, even in the most miserable conditions.

But does it really work, or is it a hoax, a scam?

Well, ask people who have experienced this! I think of quite a few people that I know, who have experienced terrible hardship. Yet, when I ask them how they are doing, they smile with a genuine smile, and say: “Fine!” Through Christ’s help they managed to deal with the hardship and receive peace and joy!

Therefore, let learn not only to complain to each other about what is wrong, let us not only watch the News with fear and trepidation, but let us learn to bring these things to the Lord, to verbalise to Him in prayer what we see, hear and fear. We will be amazed as to what difference this makes, how he gives us a different perspective.

The letter continues. It challenges us to sing praise, worship, glorify God with music and singing, and also to speak about His wonderful doings to each other. Does that really help? Are we not fooling ourselves?

Again, this is like the heat pump: It does not make sense, but it works! Ask those who have one!

Just as people with heat pumps notice a drop in electricity usage and an increase in comfort, countless Christians testify how praising God, and looking for opportunities to speak good, has given them new strength.

If we read through our hymn books, we find many hymns of praise, jubilantly saying how wonderful God is. Most of these were composed by people who had endured, or even where at that stage enduring, terrible hardships. Those Hymns gave them a new perspective, and courage and strength to continue. This morning we sang a song by Paul Gerhard. He lived through the terrible 30 year war that covered large parts of Europe. He was sacked as a pastor, had to move house, lost some of his children to death - yet this song radiates joy and gratefulness. So do many of his songs.

“How are you?” I ask someone. “It does not help to complain” he responds.

Ephesians disagrees. It does help to complain - or to put it differently: It does help to verbalise how bad things are. “The times are evil” he says - not: They are not too bad!

But then we need to learn to verbalise to our Lord, tell him what we experience (we call it prayer). It does help to complain to him! And it does help if fellow Christians know how I feel and can help me to carry.

But don’t stop there. Don’t only complain. Also learn to see where you can praise God. Learn to verbalise the good things, to lift them out, to spell them out. Learn to sing praises, even in difficult times.

In praising the seemingly impossible happens: out of troublesome, sub zero circumstances I suddenly receive comfort and strength, courage to move on.

Does it sound like a scam? Well, ask people who are doing it, let them tell you how it works! And then join them in praising God who achieves the seemingly impossible, who gives us hope in time of despair, who gives us joy in times of misery, who gives us courage to follow him and be obedient to him, and not just go with the flow.

“Be careful then, how you live - not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity.”

Amen

Horst Müller, Bishop, ELCSA(NT) Email: hmuller@elcsant.org.za