

3rd Sunday after Trinity 6 July 2014
Ezekiel 18:1-4; 21-24; 30-32
Johannesgemeinde Pretoria

The word of the LORD came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.

But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die.

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

Dear sisters and brothers,

Four teams have made it so far, and each one of them is hoping to win the World Cup final next week. 28 Teams are doing post mortems, wondering why they did not proceed further. Some trainers have been sacked. In some cases the goal keepers are blamed, or the stormers who did not storm. With some the guilty one is the player, who's foul led to the free kick that made the other team win.

It is always helpful to find the person to blame!

The people of Israel find themselves in the biggest crisis ever: Not only have they been deported to Babylon, 1000 km from home. Worse, their temple, home and testimony to the God of the universe, has been destroyed and their holy city desecrated.

How could that have happened? How could God abandon his people, how could gentiles and their gods have conquered?

As they reflect on their situation, listen to the stories of the older generation, the picture gradually becomes clear: God had given up on his people because of the

wrongdoings of many generations. For too long their ancestors had ignored the warnings and calls of the prophets. Now they have to suffer the consequences.

Their findings are summed up in the words: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"

It fits with what the commandments state, that the children are punished for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generations.

Into this situation the prophet Ezekiel is called to bring a totally new, different message. "This proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel ... it is only the person who sins that shall die."

Although this is a bit of a relief, it is still a very harsh statement. If we would stop reading at verse 4, the passage would leave us trembling. But we need to read the whole passage, and then also take seriously what has happened since then through Christ.

I would like to unpack the thoughts under the following headings: 1. Sin and its chain reaction, 2. Forgiveness and a new beginning, 3. Living a life out of forgiveness

1. Sin and its chain reaction

The statement of the sour grapes and the children that suffer the consequences holds true in many ways. What we do, does have an impact on the next generation. We should not fool ourselves. Our actions have consequences.

BUT - the problem comes when a generation hides behind the faults of its predecessors. When we blame our forefathers for our situation, and leave it at that, then we are where the Israelites found themselves during Exile.

One can take this one step further and say: If we carry over sins from the past to justify the present, we are in the same boat as the Israelites - paralysed by the past, unable or unwilling to do anything about the present.

One can apply this to quite a few situations:

In South Africa there is a tendency to excuse poor performance by blaming the past. Many relationships - in marriage, and also amongst friends, break down, because one party keeps score of the wrongdoings of the other, and ultimately blames the other for the miserable state of the relationship.

Even in one's personal life one could follow that route, and many do: People store in memory all the wrongs that they have done, all the failures, and regard themselves as failure, and unworthy to be loved.

It is true that our actions have consequences. It is true that, in a relationship, people hurt each other. It is true that past generations did take decisions and followed policies that caused a lot of damage.

But if I only focus on that, then I am caught, stuck, imprisoned by the chains of guilt and wrongdoings.

God wants to set us free from these. Through Ezekiel he says: “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.”

We read in the New Testament that God wants to break this chain. He sends his son Jesus Christ to break the power of sin, to carry the sins of the world.

That leads me to point two:

2. Forgiveness and a new beginning

In this regard Ezekiel 18 already has a New Testament ring to it: God is not interested in punishing and killing off perpetrators, but rather offers them the opportunity to start afresh.

To use an illustration from the FIFA World Cup tournament:

When a player commits a foul, he might get a yellow card. This card is carried right through the tournament. If, at any stage, he commits another Yellow Card offence, he has to skip the next game.

However, when a team reaches the semi final, all yellow cards accumulated so far are cancelled. The idea behind this is that all players should be able to play and give it their best.

I am aware that this might be a strange comparison, but the point that it makes is: When a team enters the semi final, all previous offences are as if they never existed. They start with a clean slate.

This is what forgiveness means, especially the forgiveness that Christ Jesus brings. In the New Testament we can find quite a few stories that show how Christ releases people from their past with the words: Your sins are forgiven. I do not condemn you! Go in peace!

Forgiveness gives us a glance into the heart of God - a God who takes no pleasure in destroying the godless, but who has this incredibly strong urge to bring them to life and a new beginning.

I believe that we often battle to accept this complete forgiveness. We think that God surely must somehow, somewhere keep score of our yellow cards, carry them over from one day to the next, from one year to the other, just to surprise us one day with suspension: you are out!

That is not how God works. When Jesus states: Your sins are forgiven, it means that they are gone! They will not be held against us at a later stage.

I so wish that we as Christians can also learn to forgive another in a similar way. There are so many bitter Christians, who carry with them the score cards of fellow human beings, with all the wrongs that they have done. Forgive. Tear up the score card. You will be the one who benefits most from such forgiveness!

Complete forgiveness - that is already promised by God in Ezekiel, and it was made

possible by Jesus Christ. You may start afresh!

3. Living a life out of forgiveness

If, during a soccer match, at half time all yellow and red cards issued during the first half would be cancelled, I believe that soccer would become a much dirtier and dangerous game. That is why the current system is maintained.

Unfortunately, within Christianity, the incredible gift of forgiveness has time and again resulted in Christians “playing a dirty game”. If I can start afresh every day, why bother to be good?

God foresaw this when he spoke to Israel via Ezekiel. In that passage he states that all can start afresh, but then adds: If you mess up, you will be punished!

Based on this, somehow we humans again let our relationship to God be determined by this fear of punishment, although God makes it very clear that his intention is not punishment, but life!

When Jesus came to this world, he made a huge effort to show the people this compassionate father. The gospel reading today tells us of a God passionately seeking the lost.

But he does not stop there. He then calls his followers to be precisely that: Followers, people who walk in His steps!

He sets us an example and says: Love one another, as I have loved you!

Even this is already visible in Ezekiel 18. If you study the whole chapter you will notice that the people in exile are challenged to live a life that is good for their community, a life that builds fellowship, rather than destroying it.

When Jesus forgives us, he does not do it, so that we can start messing up again, but so that we can stand up, look up, and start afresh!

When a soccer player enters the semi final and has his yellow card cancelled, he could say: No I can play dirty. If that is his attitude, he will most likely end up with a red card, leaving his team with one player short.

Rather, the soccer authorities know that in the heat of the game a player could commit a foul unintentionally, and then the past should not count against him.

When Jesus sets us free, forgives us, he does not give us a license to sin. Rather he says: your past shall not stand in the way anymore. Stand up and live, live to my glory. Be my disciple, follow my example. You will, also in future, make mistakes, even mess up terribly. But I take no pleasure in “red carding” you - rather I want you then to stand up, and start again, living to my glory.

That, dear sisters and brothers, is the Lord whom we serve. Let us do it with joy!

Amen

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