

2 Corinthians 5,14-18 Good Friday 2016 Nelspruit

14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

16 So from now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

It is the year 54 after Christ. The apostle Paul is on his third major mission journey. Four years earlier he had established the first Christian Congregation in Corinth, the bustling capital city of the Roman province of Achaia. At that occasion Paul had stayed in Corinth for 18 months - one of the longest stays in any congregation that he founded. (Acts 18) In most other cases his stay was brought to an end much sooner - either because of intense resistance by the Jewish population in a city, or through persecution by the population in general. The fact that Paul managed to stay for 18 months before he had to flee had to do with the cosmopolitan nature of Corinth. People of all faiths, cultures and societal status lived there. The level of tolerance was quite high. This filtered through into the small Christian congregation. All kinds of strange teachings and beliefs floated around, resulting in a letter being sent to Paul to clarify controversies - the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians.

His response, however, caused some more tensions within the Congregation, so that Paul decided to go there in person to sort out the issues.

But then the unthinkable happened. For the first time in his ministry he had to leave a place because of resistance from within the congregation. At the meeting to resolve issues, members of the congregation publicly insulted, and humiliated him, without the congregation reacting to it. Paul abruptly left, disappointed and in anger, and journeyed back the 1000 kilometres to Ephesus. The Corinthian Congregation had become a pastor's nightmare!

Timothy and Silas were sent to try and sort out the tensions. Through their intervention reconciliation was achieved, and so, upon receiving this good news, Paul wrote the second letter, which is regarded as the most personal of all his letters in the New Testament.

It is on this background that we need to read today's sermon text. Here Paul speaks about the significance of the death of Christ for Christians. During his mission journeys he would obviously focus on what it meant for non-Christians, who heard it for the first time. He would focus on the saving power of Christ. But now it is different. Addressing this cosmopolitan, non-homogenous Christian congregation he focusses on the transforming power of Christ: What does the death of Christ mean once someone has become a Christian?

The transforming power of the death of Christ

1. We are a new creation
2. We view people differently
3. Our role in this world is a new one

1. We are a new creation.

Paul had experienced this in a dramatic way - literally from one moment to the next he was transformed from a aggressive persecutor of Christians into a major promoter of the faith. "The old has gone, the new has come" he writes. Based on this experience he challenges the brothers and sisters in Corinth: Being a Christian does not mean that you now have an additional quality next to all the others. It is not that now, apart from being a wealthy Greek businessman, a Roman official or a Egyptian slave, you are also a Christian. No - you are a new creation, a Christian first!

Christ died for all - and in becoming Christians we died to, and rose as new people, living for Christ.

Dear sisters and brothers, this is such an important message for us today, in our time and in our country. 80% of our population calls itself Christian, yet our country has one of the highest levels of corruption, violence, abuse of power in the world. This is not due to the 20% non-Christians being so bad, but because too many of the 80% see their Christian faith as an additional quality, rather than the basis of their thinking and acting.

Because I am a politician first, I take the liberty to strive for power at all costs, tell little or big lies, make empty promises and seek my party's or my own advantage above all else.

Because I am a businessman or woman first I cheat on taxes, inflate prices, break promises without blinking an eye, as long as it is profitable.

Because I am a man first, I can treat women and children with disrespect, even abuse them.

Because I am black or white first, I can have a disregard and even hatred for people of other races or cultures.

Because I am an unhappy student or citizen first, I can destroy valuable property to express my dissatisfaction with the current situation.

Because I am Lutheran or Methodist or Catholic first, I do not need to respect other Christian denominations and can even actively work against them.

To all this Paul says: You are Christians FIRST OF ALL! You should no longer live for yourself, but first of all for Christ, who set you free!

Today, on Good Friday, each Christian is challenged to rethink the way that you understand yourself: Before anything else you belong to Christ. When you watch the news, act in a transaction, interact with people, you are first of all a Christian, accountable to Christ!

With this statement Paul challenges those who publicly insulted him: Why did you do it? What was driving you?

He himself was challenged by this and had to submit to Christ. Although he left deeply hurt, humiliated and in anger, for the sake of Christ he has forgiven and is willing to build bridges again. This is all part of being a new creation in Christ.

2. Because of Christ we view people differently

"...from now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view" he writes.

I might have the utmost disdain for a politician or a business owner or a colleague because of what they did or are doing. Paul challenges me to look at him through the eyes of Christ. "Christ died for all" ... for ALL! Also for those that I would love to hate! He died for those who plant bombs, burn Universities, lie to us in parliament, steal tax money, hate whites, hate blacks. The transforming power of Christ makes it possible for me to pray for these people, pray for them by name!

It is one of the most difficult things for me to do. When the anger boils in me,

I want to shout "Go to hell, burn in hell"

If, however, I learn to see the crucified Christ behind such a person I realise: Christ died for that person too! Christ loved that evildoer as much as he loves me.

I wish we would trust the transforming power of Christ enough to pray for these people, rather than hate them.

3. Our role in this world is a new one.

This is a direct consequence of the first two points. I still have my culture, my profession, my denomination - but the priorities have shifted, the purpose in life has changed. *"God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ ... gave us the ministry of reconciliation"*

Throughout Church history Christians have been very fond of excommunicating opponents, erecting barriers, putting sinners under discipline, dishing out punishment.

Paul, in his relationship to the nightmare congregation Corinth illustrates what "ministry of reconciliation" means: Leaving in anger and realising that he had failed, he sends others to mediate. When they succeed he is willing to reconcile and reaches out his hand of reconciliation. He even pleads for those who caused this harm. (2 Cor 1,5ff)

Why is this? The cross of Christ stood next to a busy road, bang in the middle of the world. That is where salvation and reconciliation started - in the middle of this world!.

We as Christians are not taken out of the world to live our faith in safe, protected spaces, but placed bang in the middle of the world so that the love of Christ can work through us and change the world!

When Christ died on the cross, world history was changed for ever.

When his transforming power works in us, history keeps on being changed. May this transforming power work in us, in our society, in the hearts of the 80% of Christians in the population. May it heal our country!

Amen

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