

Last Sunday after Epiphany 17 January 2016 2 Corinthians 4

Paul writes: For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. 7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

(German: Denn Gott, der sprach: Licht soll aus der Finsternis hervorleuchten, der hat einen hellen Schein in unsre Herzen gegeben, dass durch uns entstünde die Erleuchtung zur Erkenntnis der Herrlichkeit Gottes in dem Angesicht Jesu Christi. 7 Wir haben aber diesen Schatz in irdenen Gefäßen, damit die überschwängliche Kraft von Gott sei und nicht von uns. 8 Wir sind von allen Seiten bedrängt, aber wir ängstigen uns nicht. Uns ist bange, aber wir verzagen nicht. 9 Wir leiden Verfolgung, aber wir werden nicht verlassen. Wir werden unterdrückt, aber wir kommen nicht um. 10 Wir tragen allezeit das Sterben Jesu an unserm Leibe, damit auch das Leben Jesu an unserm Leibe offenbar werde.)

Treasures carried in jars of clay

Dear sisters and brothers,

This is one of the most amazing things about our God - that he chooses insignificant vessels to bring the biggest treasures of all times.

In Genesis 12 we read that God decides to make a new start to bring salvation to the world. He wants to build a nation from scratch, to become his people to carry his salvation. To start this nation, he chooses Abraham and Sarah, a childless couple who are already beyond child bearing age, rather than a young couple with lots of children. What a strange way to start a nation!

When, centuries later, he selects a king to unite this nation he chooses a family with many sons. (1 Samuel 16) The irony is that David is the only son in that family whom the dad did not see as candidate for a king. For those who remember the story: the dad had presented his sons in order of likelihood to

Samuel - and none was chosen. Only when prompted by Samuel, the dad remembered: O yes, there still is the youngest one, David, who is looking after the sheep - no candidate for a king!

When God chose to become human and send his son Jesus Christ, he chose as mother a young teenager, engaged to a carpenter from a poor little village in Israel. And when Christ is born, he chooses a cattle shed, not fit for human habitation, only used by the poorest of the poor. (Luke 1,2)

When Jesus gathers a core group of disciples with whom he wants to establish the Church, he chooses a most unlikely combination of fishermen, civil servants and young hot heads.

In a society and time where women have no say and no status, the first messenger of the resurrection on Easter morning are women! (Luke 24,10)

Paul, in this letter to the Corinthians, comes to the same conclusion: God wants his message of salvation to spread - and as messengers chooses "jars of clay" With this he refers to himself and his fellow preachers - human beings with their strengths, but also their limitations. And these "jars of clay" encounter all types of hardship and resistance - enough to suffocate the Church in its infancy!

The Church battles with this concept. Time and again it associates the gospel with glory and fights for positions of power. If you go to Israel, you will find beautiful churches that have been erected over all the insignificant "jars of clay" - the shed in Bethlehem, Mary's home in Nazareth, Golgotha, the place of the crucifixion, just to name a few. Of course it is also a sign of respect and joy for what happened there- and at the same time an attempt to bring glory and power to this lowly place.

We feel that the gospel deserves cathedrals. We clothe the bishops in wonderful, even gilded garments and believe that this is more effective to promote the gospel.

But the reality is so different.

The fastest growing Churches across the globe are not housed in cathedrals or multi-million Rand auditoriums- they are housed in garages, homes, school classes or even under trees. It grows the fastest where it is not an institution of power. In fact, in most Western European countries the Church is very close to the government, the seat of power, and continues to shrink.

Statistics show that by far the largest number of people become Christians NOT

through glamorous tele-evangelists, not through well planned and expensive rallies - but through the simple witness of friends, colleagues, family members.

Why is that? Why does God chose this route?

Let us look at the example that Paul mentions: Treasures. How do you store your treasures, your precious jewelry? As my daughters grew up, I made beautiful boxes, little treasure chests for their treasures. For wealthy people such a box would be totally insufficient. Then you need a safe that cannot be carried away or easily opened. We protect treasures with strong containers.

HOWEVER - the treasure of the gospel is not meant to be locked away, to be stored - but it is meant to be carried into the world! Jars of clay easily break and spill the contents. When that happens, bystanders might grab these treasures.

God gives his wonderful message into our lives, so that it can be spilled into the world where we live. As Paul states, all types of difficult things happen to us - and in that way the treasure is spilled, for people to grab hold of it.

A jar of clay can be easily reached into, to grab hold of its contents.

When people grab hold of the gospel that they see in us - it does not get depleted, but grows!

When a jar of clay has cracks, the contents glimmers through the cracks. Paul says that the treasure is given in us clay jars, so that it is clear that the glory is God's, not our good character!

What is this treasure, this message? It is the message that God loves us so much that he wants us to live a meaningful life - even when we have messed up.

It is the message that he does not want to keep an account of all our debts and wrongdoings, but wants to forgive us, set us free, so that we can start afresh.

It is the message that he wants enemies to reconcile. The message that he wants us to take care of others in their need.

It is the message that he has overcome death FOR EVER, and gives us life FOR EVER!

This message does not deserve to be stored away, hidden in jewel boxes or thief-proof safes. This message needs to be out there, amongst the people who need to hear it.

This message cannot be stolen by thieves - but thieves should be able to grab hold of it and be changed!

This message comes in jars of clay - for every one to reach into, grab hold of it!

How does this treasure come into your life? For many it was given into your life at your baptism, but somehow got buried deep, deep away. Today we are invited

to rediscover it: "I belong to Christ - he is mine and I am his!"

Quite a few Christians store their faith in treasure boxes or safes and only wear it at special occasions, like Sunday morning or funerals.

We need to open these boxes, take out the "jewelry", and put it on!

We do not only receive this treasure once in a life time. For all of us it is given daily, when we take time to pray, to read the Bible and receive God's word of guidance and help. Each day the Lord wants to fill our "jars of clay" with his wonderful love, hoping that it will spill out during the day, so that others can grab it!

Dear sisters and brothers, the most powerful vessels to spread this gospel are not called "bishop", "pope" or "pastor" - the most powerful vessels are called Tim, or Joyce, or Jabu, or Sophie - ordinary people that belong to Christ. In this church the most powerful messenger is not standing behind the pulpit, preaching to you now, but sitting in the pew - getting ready for the week to come.

We are receiving again this wonderful treasure - we, fallible, fragile, weak human beings. It is precisely through us that God wants to reveal his glory and recreating love!

Amen

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