

## Romans 12v17t21 4 after Trinity 2014 St Peters Pretoria

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Dear sisters and brothers,

Tuesday's semifinal Germany-Brazil was an exceptional game. What I found most astonishing was not, that Germany won 7:1, but that they did not get more goals, and that Brazil did eventually get one.

I am quite convinced that Germany could have scored at least 9 goals. In the second half I observed two incidents which I had never seen before in soccer. In both cases a German player was on the way to shoot a goal, and then stopped running, without the referee stopping them. To me it seemed that they did not want to humiliate the host nation any more than it already had been.

And when Brazil scored the goal, I am sure that the goalkeeper, Neuer, could easily have stopped the ball - but he let it through. What held the players back? I mean, they could have chased some records. Neuer jeopardized the reputation as best goal keeper. I believe that behind it was a deep sense of sportsmanship, as well as a sense of decency towards the hosts. Another team might have continued to hammer the losers and score relentlessly.

The German team also needs to be applauded for the way they conducted themselves after the match - not gloating at the Brazilians, but genuinely making an attempt to comfort and console them.

The sermon text today is from Paul's letter to the Romans.

Rome, capital of the Roman empire, at that stage already had more than a million inhabitants from all over the world. Up to fifty thousand Jews were living there.

And there were Christian communities. They most probably were started by Romans who in the course of their travels, had become Christian, and on their return found fellow Christians to meet with.

Also, some Roman Soldiers had encountered the gospel while stationed abroad, and brought this faith back with them.

You can imagine that Rome was not only a vibrant city, but also had its fair share of tension and crime. Also the Christian community had its struggles. Apart from the fact

that they weren't a homogenous group, but multicultural and influenced by different apostles, they also had their tensions with the Jews, because they regarded them as heretics. And then they had tensions with the Roman authorities. According to Roman belief, the Roman emperor was regarded as a deity and greeted with the call: Kyrie, Lord. The Christians "stole" this title and gave it to Christ. Christ is King and Lord.

It is to these Christians that Paul writes his letter. Although at that stage he had never visited Rome, he intended to do so, and with this letter introduces himself. In it he explains the gospel of Jesus Christ. This letter contains the most comprehensive theology of the Christian faith of all the books of the New Testament.

In view of their circumstances one could expect Paul to encourage the Christians to "fight to win" - in Soccer terms: to beat the enemy with as many goals as possible. He could encourage them to isolate themselves from their "host city", and treat them as enemies of the gospel and themselves.

But he does not. In fact, his instructions are quite the opposite:

Do what is right/good; live in peace with every one, do not take revenge, take good care of the enemy when he is hungry or thirsty. Lastly: Overcome evil with good!

All this seems like a tall order - and it is! Because none of these come naturally. Often, it is rather the opposite that comes naturally.

Why does Paul expect the Christians in Rome to be like that?

The answer is in 12:1: He appeals to Christians to be motivated by the mercy of God. God's mercy means that God deeply cares about this world and all its people, and that God wishes for mankind to live.

This mercy of God should be the nurturing ground from which our actions grow. It should be the basis of our moral behaviour.

So, with 12:1 in mind, one can say:

1. Because of the mercy of God we should do what is good.

(Here I need to remark that various translations have it differently. The NIV states: "To what is right in the eyes of everyone" Some, however, translate it better, and closer to the Greek, which reads: Do what is good for everyone.

The difference between the two is significant. I can do what is right, and in the process make the lives of people miserable. But if I do what is good, it means that my actions are a blessing to the people. Christians are called to do what is good, because God also chose to do what is good for us. Christ Jesus came and set us free from our wrongs, forgave us, and brought us life! This our lives should reflect! At Tuesday's soccer game, the German team could have stuck to what is right, and heaped the score. But at some stage they decided to do what is good and prevent further humiliation.

2. Because of God's mercy we should live at peace with everyone.

Interestingly Paul states: If it possible, as far as it depends on you. More than many he

knows that often peace is not possible because others just don't want it. But his word to Christians is: Lack of peace should not be due to your wrong actions! He does not call for peace at all costs, where Christians compromise their principles and faith, but despite all tensions that arise because of their faith, peace should be the aim.

There are Christians that spend a lot of time to tell everybody how bad the world is, how evil the people are, and that they themselves are saved, and not lost. I believe that this attitude contradicts the mercy of God. Jesus lived this mercy by going to those who had been rejected by the pious, he met with those that had been discarded by the honourable society. Eventually this cost him his life. His aim was to bring peace. Time and again that is how he greeted his disciples: Peace be with you. Based on Romans 12 we could amend the greeting so that it says: Peace be through you!

### 3. Because of God's great mercy we should not take revenge

When peace is not possible due to the actions of others, revenge comes very easily. Especially when Christians are treated badly for their faith. Currently quite a few places in Africa have conflict zones caused by religious fighting. In some cases Christians were the first to attack, in other Muslims. Yet in all cases it escalated when revenge action was taken.

Paul challenges the Christian to again turn to God - this time not referring to God's mercy, but to the fact that God is just, and that ultimately we are all accountable to him. He does not call the wrath of God on the enemies, but entrusts the enemy to God. So - how should Christians then treat their enemies, if not with revenge?

### 4. Because of God's mercy, be good to your enemy!

From all fighting contexts this does not make sense at all. A thirsty and hungry enemy is a weak one. Be feeding and giving to drink, you are actually strengthening the enemy.

Imagine at tonight's final soccer game one team coach pointing out to the other one where their weaknesses are? That would be ridiculous.

Many Christians would regard this statement of Paul also as ridiculous. Interestingly, Paul is citing an Old Testament passage from Proverbs.

It is, however, a good summary of the teachings of Jesus on how we should treat enemies.

The purpose behind this is not to strengthen the enemy and thus prolong the war. Rather, through such actions of kindness we discover the humans in each other, and it makes harsh action much more difficult.

In the run up to our 1994 elections something similar happened. A man named Michael Cassidy and his team from Africa Enterprise, a Christian mission organisation, organised bush retreats. They invited people from each political party to these retreats - for each event those from the same level within their party. He started with junior

people and gradually moved up, right to the level of the General Secretaries. No one was allowed to bring weapons (for many that was a major issue, since the level of distrust was extreme), and at the retreat the main purpose was that the people got to know each other as people and not as party functionaries. At the end of each retreat new friendships were established, and sometimes officials from opposing parties exchanged their private telephone numbers with each other.

When the IFP withdrew from the elections, a blood bath was expected. Behind the scenes Michael Cassidy, together with Kenyan Diplomat Washington Okumu attempted to get the IFP on board again. The deadline was missed. Then they made use of the friendships that were started during the bush retreats, and the main stakeholders convinced their party leadership to give it another try.

A war was averted because enemies had got to know each other as humans and even as friends.

### 5. Lastly: Because of God's mercy, overcome evil with good.

The Greek word for good, used in verse 21, is not the same as in verse 17.

Whereas verse 17's word describes actions that are visible, verse 21, *agathoi*, describes a deep rooted attitude.

Paul thus challenges the Christians that their approach to the world should be determined by a different nature, attitude, life philosophy - the attitude that sees the world as all in it belonging to God. The attitude that recognises that Jesus died for all people. The attitude that knows that God's biggest wish is that the whole of creation and every single person gets to know that Christ is Lord.

Does it work? From History we know that, despite intense persecution and hate campaigns, Christianity kept on spreading amongst the "enemy", until eventually the emperor himself became a Christian. It had worked!

We also know that there were times of brutal mission expansion, where the Church spread the word through the sword. You could choose between baptism and capital punishment. Although whole nations were "christianised" in that way, in many cases the people never really became Christians, and the nature of Christ did not become their nature. This resulted in many terrible developments in the Church.

Today we are being called, as Christians, similar to those in Rome, living in the capital of our country, to live Christ minded, to act in such a way that God's mercy is reflected, and to allow his mercy to grow in us and change our attitude.

Peace be through you!

Amen

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