

Romans 5,1-11, Sunday Reminiszere, 21.02.2016

Dear sisters and brothers,

Rome - capital of the world. Seat of the Roman empire. Heart of the emperor cult where Caesar is worshipped as deity in our midst. One of the best preserved buildings of ancient Rome, the Pantheon, was built as a temple to the roman emperor. (Today it is used as a Church)

Rome also was the mega city of diversity. More than half of the population where slaves. Often these were prisoners of war, captured during successful campaigns of the Roman armies. In that sense the people of Rome represented most known nations of the world.

A fairly large Jewish community had been established in Rome, at one stage as large as 10% of the population. There was, however, a constant tension between these and the Roman authorities, mainly due to the refusal of the Jews to join the emperor worship.

Shortly after the start of the Christian Church, the first Christians arrived in Rome - some as slaves, others as Roman soldiers who had converted to Christ, and some being Jewish-Christian tradespeople settling down in the world capital.

As was the case throughout elsewhere, very soon tensions erupted between Jews and Christians in Rome. The Roman emperor Claudius, who did not distinguish between Jews and Christians, evicted them all, calling them all “followers of Chrestos” and trouble makers. They where completely banished from Rome.

During his second mission journey Paul met two of these evicted Christians, Priscilla and Aquila, in Corinth and stayed with them. One can only imagine how he eagerly listened to their stories regarding the world capital and the challenges that they had to face there. It might very well be that this gradually awakened in him the wish to travel to Rome and preach there as well.

When, a few years later, he again was in Corinth, the banishing order against Jews and Christians from Rome had been lifted, and Paul decided that is was time to make the journey. He did not, however, want to cause renewed tension and jeopardize the safety of the Christian community. Thus he decided to write a letter, introducing himself to the Roman Christians. In this letter he clearly states what separates the Jews from the Christians, to show that the Christians were not the same as the Jews.(Romans 3-11) Furthermore he makes it very clear that Christians are not trouble makers, but people that respect the worldly authority and pray for it. (Romans 13)

The most important aspect of the letter to the Romans however is this: Paul makes it very clear that Jesus Christ is the centre of the faith, the turning point in history, and relevant for all of humanity, not only the Jews, and certainly not only for the Christians.

I love the way how Paul clearly describes what the meaning and essence of the gospel is. Many people shy away from the letter, because it is too “dogmatic”. But if one considers the reason why it was written, the “dogma” comes alive and beautiful. It is not dry theology, but a proclamation into a risky situation, telling who Christ is.

Let us look at the passage 5, 1-11

1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! 10 For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11 Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

It starts off, explaining what Jesus did for us.

1. What Jesus did for us

“We have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” Paul speaks from is own experience. He knows full well for how long, as a Jew, he tried his level best to please God, even if it meant to kill heretics. But then he encountered Jesus - or rather: Jesus stopped him at a “road block” Everything came to a halt. There, on the road to Damascus, his life changed for ever. It took a while for him to grasp what had happened. But it dawned unto him that Jesus had accepted him, despite everything he had done. God held out his hand of reconciliation, knowing full well that Paul did not deserve it. For the first time in his life Paul had peace with God.

In his old way of thinking no peace would have been possible without a prolonged time of penitence and sacrifice. But now he experienced how Christ set him free, not to live a life of regret, but to become his messenger and share the good news where ever he went. For both Jews and Gentiles this was an extraordinary message.

The Gentiles, especially those worshipping caesar, always lived in fear. If you somehow got on the wrong side of caesar, that was the end. He was known for his brutality towards all who were against him, and some caesars would execute people just for the fun of it. And for the large slave population in Rome fear was part of their life. In their home countries they were prominent people, but after losing the war they lived here in Rome hoping to stay alive, totally at the mercy of Caesar. “Peace with God” was a revolutionary message to them.

For the Jews also, peace with God was a very shaky business. There were possibilities for forgiveness, such as sacrifices and rituals that could bring about forgiveness, provided that they were done in the right way following all procedures. Yet even then this

forgiveness was only valid for the wrongs of the past. So the “Peace with God” was fairly short lived.

The amazing thing of the gospel is that God, in Christ, stretches out his hand to us and offers us peace, something that Caesar would only do for his best friends (as long as they remained true to him), and in the Jewish understanding would only happen when you had cleansed yourself properly.

But Jesus died for us when we were still sinners, Paul exclaims! That is why this peace with God does not stand on the shaky foundation of our good behaviour, but on the firm foundation of God’s incredible love!

Dear sisters and brothers, we are not torn between various religions, but most of us grew up in the Christian faith. Yet, somehow, many Christians battle to believe that this stretched out hand of Christ is unconditional. When we have failed our Lord, we feel like hiding. Yet the peace that Christ offers to me has no expiry date, and is not used up. Every morning, every evening, and a thousand times each day I can look to him and hear: You are mine! When I have fallen, I can come back to receive forgiveness. You are mine!

However, this wonderful gospel was not well received. Caesar himself did not appreciate it at all, since he thrived on the eternal fears of the people.

The Jews rejected it, since they did not believe that Jesus was indeed the messiah that they were waiting for, but a false prophet who could not be trusted..

As a result this Christians time and again encountered severe persecution. Paul speaks about these lesser pleasant results of the gospel.

2. Less pleasant consequences of the gospel

Many Christians at the time of Paul grappled with the question: Should I openly confess my faith and risk my life, or should I rather keep it for myself and stay safe.

For Paul it was clear: The gospel is not something to be kept secret. Jesus said: It is like a city on a mountain - it cannot stay hidden! Or like a lamp, that is placed on a bucket and not under it, so that the light can shine.

Pauls interpretation of the suffering caused by being Christian is: it makes you stronger! “Yes sure - dream on!” one could think. But Paul speaks from experience. Somehow, each time that he went through tough times - and he went through many of them! - he came out with more hope, with more direction than before!

So, when he says: “*suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.*” - that was what he and his fellow Christians had experienced.

We are fortunate that our lives are not threatened because we follow Christ - but still many of us find it difficult to live out this love of Christ and share it in deed and word. The deed often is still OK - but putting the words to it is more difficult.

This might be a reason why in many countries the Church is shrinking - because ordinary

Christians are not spreading the gospel. On the other hand in countries where the Church is growing, it happens through the work and witness of ordinary Christians.

I wonder how Paul would have written this passage if it were to prepare a visit to us here in Gauteng? What are the challenges that we face as Christians? Where does our faith bring us into conflict with society?

Perhaps would challenge us not to be part of corruption - from little things like jumping the red light to tax evasion to giving and receiving bribes. Or things like empty promises such as: I will call you back, knowing that I wont. Or: I will pray for you, knowing that I will not.

Sometimes I think that the biggest conflict that my faith brings me into is with myself - when I am safe in my comfort zone, and Christ challenges me to step outside and reach out and I decide to ignore it.

Having peace with God does not mean to live a life of tranquillity. Rather it means that because I have this most important peace, I can face all types of situations without having to fear.

When Paul speaks about “perseverance” it means to remain standing, and if you fall, to get up again, even against all odds.

Our world needs Christians that “stand up” and follow Christ in their daily life - as business people, as politicians, teachers, tradespeople, parents, students.

With the municipal elections coming up many parties will campaign for our votes. There is no single party that stands out as the one that Christians should vote for. I believe that you should make it a matter of prayer, and ask: Where must I make my cross, and were dare I not make it?

History has shown how Christians time and again have allowed themselves to be misled by politicians because they were not observant enough.

The same applies to the current student unrest. Where do I need to support a cause, and where do I need to stand up against it? The answer is not always clear, since there is no single movement that has all the correct answers. As Christians we have to find a way that we feel we can account for.

So, our challenges are very different from the ones of the Christians in Rome - but certainly just as tricky, even though not deadly.

Paul is aware that one of the biggest threats is that Christians lose hope and give up.

Again he responds by referring to Christ: If Christ died for us while we were his enemies, how much more will he bring us to completion now that we belong to him?!

This gives him a hope that carries through: God did not turn his back on me when I fought him. Surely he will accompany me now that I follow him!

So, being a Christian does not only mean to have peace with God - it also means that I have a future, guaranteed by God.

Amen

Horst Müller, Bishop, ELCSA(N-T) Email: hmuller@elcsant.org.za