

Song festival ELCSA (N-T) Wartburg, 7 May 2017

“If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit” John 15

Jesus says: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 5

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Dear sisters and brothers,

The situation in South Africa is quite serious. Before Easter Church leaders met to discuss the state of the nation. We heard things that are on the news, but also things that are not, listened to people fearing for their lives because they criticise corruption.

I was unsure - should I address this serious situation in our country? Or should I, at least today at the song festival, steer clear of politics?

Eventually I decided to share this story with you. Because of the sensitivity and grave danger I will not divulge the name, because there is a strong possibility that he could be charged with treason.

He was summonsed to appear before parliament in April. His friends and advisors tried to convince him not to go. It is too dangerous.

But he, on the other hand, thought: This might be the opportunity to address leadership itself. What he had said so far does not amount to treason. If he could explain it directly to cabinet and top leadership, they cannot but agree. Surely they are not part of the corruption and exploitation that he is am fighting.

When he then also got a letter of amnesty guaranteeing his safety and fair treatment he decided to go.

The appearance before parliament went wrong dismally. In stead of giving him a chance to explain and provide details, the speaker only demanded him

to withdraw and “stop the nonsense”. Parliament would accept an apology, and might only then consider mercy.

How could he agree? He knew that his allegations were true and well founded. If he apologized, the corruption would continue unabated, unchallenged. The masses would continue to suffer, and suffer even more!

That was on the 18th of April. The verdict came quickly: Guilty as charged. Fortunately the letter of limited amnesty was honoured - he had a few more days before the secret service would arrest him, and he would disappear for ever.

His official government escort home was provided as agreed, but arranged in such a way that it would be very easy to get rid of him once the amnesty had expired. Only one vehicle and a junior body guard were assigned to take him home.

And so, on the morning of 4 May his vehicle was ambushed. No one was hurt - but he was taken - he disappeared without a trace.

A highly confidential report has it that the ambush was a friendly one, orchestrated and executed with utmost secrecy to safe his life.

The first communication on the 6th of May to his friends was untraceable. It was just a short note telling them that he was safe and that they should not worry.

The reason why I decided to share this as we gather here in Wartburg, is because this ambush happened near Wartburg on 4 May ... 1521.

Martin Luther, to whom it happened, was not happy at all. Rather he would die at the hand of his enemies than be kept in total isolation.

He was not well, slept badly, had severe constipation. We know all this from the many letters that he wrote from the Wartburg. He was a human being - just like you and me, disappointed and deeply worried about the state of affairs - just like many of us. Unrest was hanging in the air. Sporadic uprisings threatened the peace. Just like now. Voices calling for correction of affairs were ignored or silenced. Just like in our time.

The Reformation that had started just three and a half years earlier was in grave danger of being stopped, the leader killed.

Dear congregation, we are meeting here in Wartburg, named after the castle where Luther lived for 10 months, from 4 May 1521 to 1 March 1522, fearing for his life. The famous reformation song “a mighty fortress” gives an indication of the danger he was in, and the hope: Der Fürst dieser Welt, wie sauer er sich stellt, groß Macht und viel List sein grausam Rüstung ist. Auf

Erd ist nichts sein's gleichen!" (The ruler of this world is angry. Power and clever schemes are his cruel armour.)

It is common knowledge that Luther translated the New Testament whilst there. But did you know that he stayed there for eight months before starting this project - eight months of letter writing, complaining, hoping and despairing? The idea to translate the Bible did not come to him. There were too many issues, too many problems he had to deal with.

Early in December, after seven months, he secretly visited Wittenberg. By now his beard and long hair had made him unrecognizable so that he could risk it.

The company of his friends and colleagues did him the world of good. It was there, at the secret meetings in Wittenberg, that the friends suggested to him: Translate the New Testament into a German that all can understand.

What a brilliant idea. Was it not the New Testament that had made him aware of the corruption and wrong teachings of the Church? Was it not the New Testament that had shown him Jesus Christ as Saviour? Of course, that was it!

He was banned, his writings were banned. If he could get the New Testament to the people they would read it, and the message could continue. All powers and authorities were out to stop this movement - if we get the New Testament to the people, nothing will be able to stop it!

And so, for 11 weeks that followed he worked tirelessly to translate the New Testament. In only eleven weeks! I would battle to just copy it by hand in that time - much less translate it! But he did.

After these eleven weeks two things happened:

I start with the second one: the publication of the New Testament in September 1522. By Christmas that year it was sold out completely and had to be re-printed. This New Testament had a lasting impact on the Reformation. The first thing that happened, however is just as important: Luther left the Wartburg, left his hiding place to continue his campaign for the gospel, for truth and for correction.

His security situation was even more serious than it had been in May 1521. The danger and threat to his life had increased rather than subsided.

I believe that his intense working with the New Testament had convinced him: I can no longer be quiet, I can no longer say and do nothing. I have to act. It is like a tea bag in hot water: The water becomes tea. The intense working with the New Testament had infused him with the teachings of Jesus, the drive

of the apostles, the courage to continue with his calling.

Dear sisters and brothers,

We heard Jesus saying in John 15: **Remain in me, and you will bear much fruit.**

Although, on the Wartburg, Luther had remained in prayer and devotion, he missed the fellowship. It took the week in Wittenberg, with his fellow Christians, to give him orientation again. It took the intense working with the New Testament to really connect him to Christ again, or to use the words of Jesus: To remain in Him, and His words in Luther.

I want us to take these lessons home from this festival in Wartburg, home into our daily environment, home into the political turmoil:

Our country needs us to remain in Christ.

For us to remain in Christ, we need fellowship with other believers - praying together, discussing, and encouraging one another.

Secondly, drench yourself with the word of God, especially the New Testament. Read it, study it intensely, and it will influence you, it will challenge and change your thinking and your actions. It will reveal Christ to you as the one who cares and is deeply concerned, also about us and our times. His Word will grow in you and encourage you.

Thirdly, it bears fruit. Do not be afraid to speak up for the truth, to act according to the gospel. Do not stay in your Wartburg, but go where the Lord sends you to go. Trust that he will guide you! Do not be afraid!

Our times are as challenging as Europe in 1521. Will South Africa go the Zimbabwe route? Will a hand full of corrupt politicians and business people walk away with everything, leaving the nation in poverty?

The South African Council of Churches is calling for a prayer campaign between Ascension (24 May) and Pentecost (6 June) - join with other Christians to pray for renewal of the Church, of Christians, of society.

But now is also the time to read the Bible more intensely than ever. Study it, let the Word, his Words, dwell in you and grow in you.

We gather here in Wartburg. May we be strengthened as the Reformer was, ready to live and act to the glory of Christ the Lord, to go and bear much fruit.

Amen

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