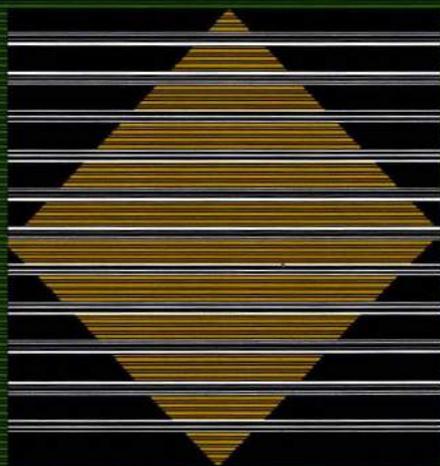


MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

DISCOVERING THE REAL
WEALTH OF SCRIPTURE



BJ VAN DER WALT





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Discovering the real wealth of Scripture

B.J. VAN DER WALT

Potchefstroom
The Institute for Contemporary
Christianity in Africa
2015

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PREFACE

To reflect on matters of lifeview (my task at the Institute for Reformational Studies) and to be involved in Philosophy (my work at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education) I regard as a special privilege. But perhaps it is still more wonderful as a Christian to be able to drink at the Source of our reformational vision of life and philosophy - the Word of God.

To be able to explore the wealth of God's Word remains one of the great joys of my life. I like to disseminate the gospel in a simple way on Sundays in a mission situation. I enjoy doing Bible study with students, and from time to time to officiate at a wedding, write a meditation for a magazine or to hold morning or evening devotions at a conference. I have also officiated at funerals.

This will explain the variety which you will find in the present volume: brief meditations, opening addresses and sermons, and also more systematic Scriptural exegeses. Because all this is now being offered to a wider reading public, I have in most cases removed the local situation and the temporal references from the pieces. In the case of some of them, however, this has not been easy or even possible, because then I would have had to remove the whole application, and the message would have been lost.

Only a few chapters were originally written in English. Most of the chapters were in the Afrikaans language. I am indebted to Prof. Annette Combrink-Loots, head of the Department of English at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, who translated them to be included in this volume.

May the new readership also include, as the original one did, young as well as older people.

Christendom is at present growing in Africa at an unprecedented rate. The people of Africa are hungry for the gospel, and they are among the most convinced, honest and refined Christians from all over the world that I have had the privilege to meet in the course of the last few years. To them and to my (still unknown) brothers and sisters in the faith in Africa, I would like in all humility to dedicate this volume.

If Christians could find something in these pages to give them strength and renewed faith, if they could be inspired to live in the service of God with renewed vigour, then this volume will have attained its purpose.

Bennie van der Walt

Spring 1990

Postscript

Because of the time span that elapsed between the origin of the various chapters, different Bible translations have been used in this book.

ABOUT BEING MARRIED

Chapter 1

FINDING A HUSBAND/WIFE

4 000 years ago and today

(Genesis 24)

Has it struck you that in Genesis, whenever it is stated that God created some entity, there is the refrain-like comment *that God saw that it was good*. This refrain is broken only once when God says that "It is not good...." (Genesis 2:18). What, then, could be wrong in the midst of all the good things created by God? The fact that Adam was all alone in the midst of the animals. He could not, among them, find a help meet, an equal (Genesis 2:20). It was only when God created a woman, Eve, and brought her to him that everything was perfect, very good.

A song of praise without end

Here we find the first hymn of praise in the Bible: the love song which Adam had for Eve (Genesis 2:23). This song of joy, coming from two people who had found each other and knew that they were intended for each other by God, has been sung and resung from the mists of time to the present - countless times.

But how do I get to the point where, with full surrender, I can become a part of the choir?

How do I know whether somebody is the right husband/wife for me? Since the dawn of mankind to the present day this has been a question which has been asked millions of times.

Adam and Isaac

We often envy our old forefather Adam because he did not have such a wide and confusing choice. But especially because the Bible says (Genesis 2:22) that God Himself brought Eve to Adam.

We no longer keep to the customs of the past that your parents rather than you would select your prospective spouse. But at times we still think -

especially if a number of relationships have already foundered - that it might perhaps have been better if we could be helped to our better halves in the way that Isaac found Rebecca (Genesis 24). Abraham simply gave the command that his servant, probably Eliezer (Genesis 15:2) should go and find a wife for Isaac!

Man and God in the process of choosing a marriage partner

I am not an advocate of marriage enforced by parents. But I still do think that in our secularized, humanistic world we put too much stress on the matter of personal choice.

Is it true that I make a choice myself? Is it not perhaps true that my marriage partner is chosen for me? Or is the Marriage Formulary oldfashioned when it states that God even today, as by the hand, leads my partner to me? Is the fact that we no longer share the faith expressed in this view not perhaps the reason why so many young people struggle to find certainty and security? In the end they do take the plunge then, and very soon they are deeply disillusioned.

Genesis 24

Even though it happened about 4 000 years ago that someone had to go and find a wife for Isaac, I am still convinced that we can learn a great deal from this romantic history as recounted in Genesis 24. Let us look at the story step by step.

Have you noticed that it is one of the longest chapters (66 verses) in the book of Genesis and also in the whole of the Bible? This is not only because the Easterners loved stories, but also because we have to be made aware of each tiny detail.

Abraham is worried about Isaac - as will any parent today if a son or daughter does not give all that much indication of interest in the opposite sex. Sarah was not there any more and he himself was getting old. And the Lord had promised that all the nations of the earth would be blessed in his descendants.

Abraham's first requirement

However keen he was to have his son married, he could not allow one of the daughters of the Canaanites to become his daughter-in-law.

They knew nothing of the true God but worshipped idols (Genesis 15:16) and lived impure lives.

Here we have to do with one of the first requirements encountered when one starts looking for a wife/husband. Do not try to pull a cart harnessed together with an unbeliever - it is doomed to failure from the very outset.

One fine day the decision was made. Abraham called his servant Eliezer, and the man could immediately see that his master had a great and important matter to share with him.

And this was so. He not only had to take an oath that he would not let Isaac marry a Canaanite girl. He also had to travel to Haran (where Abraham's relatives, who had come with him from Ur, had settled), and he had to try and find a wife for Isaac from among their ranks.

It is easier to make war than to choose somebody to love...

One might well regard it as a tall order to do this. It is difficult enough to find a wife for yourself. Eliezer, however, had to satisfy both Abraham and Isaac. And more: He also had to keep in mind the Will of Abraham's God (We see this clearly from his prayer at the well.)

It would not be easy. His master could perhaps more readily have ordered him to go to war: this would have been easier. He stood before the most difficult order of his life...

Love cannot be enforced, nor can it be bought...

While the servant was journeying to Mesopotamia with his ten camels he wondered how he would tackle this problem. He did have enough gifts with him, but love cannot be bought, after all - not even with this considerable "lobola" . (A term used in Southern Africa indicating the gift which the bridegroom gives to the family of his bride.) Cf. the Sullamite young

woman in the Song of Songs who says that even if one should pay all he possesses to buy love, they will only have contempt for such a person.

He would most definitely have preferred Isaac to do his courting himself. But Abraham had been adamant: The Lord had given the land to him as part of a covenant and it had been promised to him and his children and their children. Isaac could not leave it under any circumstances. If the woman should not want to come with him he would be absolved of his oath. But, Abraham added in firmness of faith, the Lord will send his angel to lead you, so that you may be successful. Abraham did not launch "Operation Wife" without prayer!

Modern methods

If Eliezer had lived 4 000 years later, he might, immediately upon his arrival in Haran have placed an advertisement in the *Haran Herald*: "Wealthy attractive young farmer in Canaan, looking for a lady friend. Black hair, brown eyes, hook nose, average height ... Likes the outdoors".

Unfortunately - or fortunately? - they did not yet have columns for the lonely hearts brigade in those days.

Eliezer, however, used his common sense. He knew the customs of the land. In the late afternoon the young girls came to the fountain, where he also had to water his camels after the long journey, to fetch water. He would lie in wait there and select a girl for Isaac. Although he was already old he was by no means blind!

Of course one also has to use common sense in the choice of a marriage partner - even though people might say that love is blind. The heart alone cannot have the final say - intelligence also has a role to play.

But one does not get very far using one's brain. Thus the matchmaker began to have his doubts: Suppose all the girls were equally attractive? Therefore we find that the second personage in this story of the quest for a marriage partner is forced to his knees. Eliezer sends up a fleeting prayer (verse 12-14). What does he say in prayer? He asks that not he himself but God should choose for Isaac (verse 14). He also asks for a sign. If he should choose one and ask her for water, she should not only show herself willing to give water to him but to water his camels as well.

Eliezer's first criterion

Eliezer knew what he was doing. He sought not only outward beauty but also inner beauty. Isaac's future wife should also be friendly and helpful. Friendliness is not something automatic, it is one of the great gifts which the Holy Spirit grants us (cf. Galatians 5:22).

And if a woman is not helpful, then how would she be able to fulfil the requirement set by God Himself, viz. that she should be a help meet for the man (Genesis 2:18)?

And he made quite certain! Because it would not only entail turning a tap for the girl to water his ten thirsty camels. No, she would have to be willing to climb down the circular staircase to the surface of the water a good few times, and climb up again laboriously with the heavy pitcher.

Beautiful, but ...

We wait in great expectation. But the Biblical story is swift. Eliezer had not quite finished his prayer before the first girl appeared at the well, with her water pitcher slung over her shoulder.

We can well imagine how closely Eliezer watched her - without, of course, being too obvious about it.

Well, well, not bad at all (verse 16)! If Isaac had been there, one can well imagine that his heart would have started beating faster. But the final decision was not his, it rested in the hands of God alone.

Eliezer's second criterion

Whether he could deduce it from her clothing or ornaments, we don't know. But the Bible states clearly that she was a virgin, never having known a man. Apart from her helpfulness and friendliness this was then obviously also important to Eliezer. It is no less important today, at a time when sleeping together and living together have become common for unmarried couples.

When she had filled her pitcher, the old slave of Abraham ran towards her and asked the question agreed upon with the Lord. And her reply? "Drink, my lord!"

In imaginative language, full of beautiful images, the author of the book of Genesis tells how the beautiful young woman swung the pitcher from her shoulder on to her delicate hand and offered it to the bearded old man to drink.

The Lord listens

I don't believe any water could ever have tasted so good to Eliezer. The Lord had precisely heard the first part of his prayer. The tension mounts as he waits for the final verdict ...

And then it came: She would also go and fetch water for the camels! She ran to the fountain and hauled up water for the camels while the old man watched her silently to determine whether the Lord had made him successful in his quest.

Eliezer's third criterion

Did he still have any doubts? In truth, yes. She was beautiful. She was friendly and helpful. She was not yet married. But this was not the most important thing to know. He still had to find out whether she belonged to the small group of Abraham's people who were not pagans but believers.

With true eastern extravagance Rebecca receives a golden nosering of half a shekel weight, and two bracelets for her arms of ten shekels weight in gold! And then came the great question: Whose daughter are you?

Eliezer was not disappointed. From her reply he could deduce that she belonged to Abraham's family. He did not yet ask her for her consent to the marriage, as the family decided about such issues in those days, but she had already revealed her hospitality by inviting him, with his camels, to spend the night at her parents' home.

Thanksgiving after a prayer has been heard

Before Eliezer moved off to Betuel's house, he first knelt down again: One prays not only to ask but also to offer thanksgiving. Humbly, as it behove a slave, he offered reverence to the God of Abraham for having guided him (verse 27) to the house where he would find the right wife for Isaac. God was not for him, as for many of us, a god of emergencies only!

How often do we, married people, thank the Lord - even though it might have been thirty years ago! - for having given us the right marriage partner?

In great excitement Rebecca had in the meantime run home - without the water pitcher, perhaps - to tell her mother everything.

Laban, her brother, immediately took control when he saw the precious ring and bracelets. Eliezer was invited to their home. Only after the camels had been seen to, Eliezer and his dusty helpers had a turn to wash and eat!

The decision to be made by the family

Eliezer, however, could not eat before fully completing his commission. He was not quite sure of himself yet. What would you have done if you had a daughter of marriageable age and a stranger came from a foreign country with the stunning news that he has come to fetch your daughter to become the wife of his wealthy master's son?

In the following fourteen verses Eliezer repeated to his hosts what we already know. But in doing this, he stressed one thing very clearly to them: nobody less than God Himself had guided him straight to Rebecca.

Betuel and Laban's faith in God appeared from their reply:

"The thing proceedeth from the Lord ..." (verse 50). Rebecca would become the wife of Isaac because God had decreed it (verse 51).

A triple prayer

For the third time Eliezer bent his head to pray (verse 52) to the Lord and to thank Him. The most difficult commission he had ever had had been completed!

Rebecca and her family were loaded down with gifts of clothing, of silver and of gold. Only then the marriage contract could be completed and celebrated with the food - that must have grown cold in the meantime.

Who has to decide: I myself, or my parents?

How very different it is today. The main character in this love epic had been quite in the background. She could not say one word! Did her father and her brother simply "sell" her, and did she have to obey, albeit out of disgust? Did she sleep at all that night? To become, like a bolt from the blue, a bride intended for a man in a far country ...

Yes, in days gone by the parents had all the say in the choice of a marriage partner, but today the children often have the final say. As usual the golden means lies between the two extremes. Neither you nor your parents decide - you do it together. We who are living in this modern age should therefore be careful about saying that it is a personal issue to be decided between two people only. Your parents do not only have a say but also a responsibility. Ask for their honest judgment.

Rebecca gives consent - after a night of struggling prayerfully?

It so happened that Rebecca did get an opportunity to reply to the offer of marriage herself.

Eliezer did not let any grass grow under his feet. The following morning he wanted to start the return journey. Rebecca's mother and Laban objected, but this fell on deaf ears. Thus Rebecca herself had to give the decisive answer. Once again Eliezer held his thumbs!

"Wilt thou go with this man?" This question, sounding curiously like the one asked at weddings today elicited a decisive reply: "I will go".

It is not conceivable that Rebecca could have given this firm reply if she had not struggled in prayer the foregoing night.

With the blessing of the family

While Rebecca, her nurse Deborah (Genesis 35:8) and other female slaves got onto the camels, her family greeted her with benedictions, which have since been confirmed by the course of history.

The basically human things have not changed over millennia. Whoever today thinks that he/she can marry without the blessing and the benediction of parents makes a grave error. For that reason a believer does not simply sneak into the magistrate's court to marry, but he marries in public, in the presence of family and friends, in the church.

The meeting

For how long the caravan had to trudge wearily along the dusty road we do not know. One evening, however, the end of this Biblical novel suddenly arrived. Rebecca saw a man standing in the field, meditating, and her feminine intuition told her immediately that this was Isaac. Therefor she slid from the camel - not to greet him down her nose! - and then asked, just to make quite certain, whether it was Isaac approaching. When Eliezer confirmed it, she drew her veil over her face, as was the custom.

Rebecca saw a man. Isaac saw a woman. Although many similar events had occurred thousands of times before, each meeting is still a unique one.

In the twilight the two met. They had been living hundreds of kilometres from each other, and had never before seen each other. (Does this not happen more often today with our modern mobility and fast transport?) But: They knew that they were intended for each other!

Prayer: for the umpteenth time

Not only Rebecca knew this - Isaac also knew it. It is not said for nothing that towards the evening he had gone into the field to meditate (as it says in verse 63 of the Authorized Version). We don't need a great deal of imagination to know that Isaac would have been very worried about

whether Eliezer's mission would have been successful. He must also have prayed very sincerely to find the right marriage partner.

After Eliezer had, right there in the field, told the story again with even more embellishments to Isaac, Isaac also knew with supra-human certainty that the beautiful young woman standing in front of him was his intended help meet - and he hers. The reason is simple: God does not make mistakes as people do.

The Bible: Not a novel but a Book to strengthen faith

We can almost say that it is a pity that the Biblical historian, who had not so far been sparing of his details in telling this story, should now let the curtain fall. We would have loved to have known how Isaac took Rebecca's hands into his and what words he first whispered to her ...

For that you have to read Solomon's The Song of Songs. In this case the writer had completed his task. He concentrated on the most important, which is to indicate how God Himself guides husband and wife to each other - at times in the most wonderful ways.

Love - from God too

This was the secret of the second last sentence of this chapter: "... and she became his wife, and he loved her ..." (verse 66). Not because he had chosen her, but because God had chosen them for each other. God does not only bring people to each other - he also kindles the flame of love.

It is no wonder that, in the case of Isaac (in contrast to the other patriarchs) we never read that he also had other wives. In this period their life was a shining example of a very happy monogamous marriage.

What "help" really means

Isaac discovered what God's intention had been with marriage right from the time of creation: a help meet for him (Genesis 2:18). A new translation (Good News Bible) is even more explicit in saying that it is a suitable companion to be his partner. The older translation can well give the erroneous impression - and the men have been very keen to perpetuate

this impression! - that the wife had to be some sort of slavish assistant or servant.

The same word "help" is also used in the Bible where it is said of God that He is our *help*. And He can never be our servant! "Help" thus rather indicates that the woman has to be the support, the strength and the cherisher of the man. Men, here you have another guideline in the choice of a marriage partner: will she be a source of strength and inspiration in your life, or would she rather rob you of all strength and courage? (The women might as well apply a similar test.)

The other side of the coin

But God's guidance constitutes only one part of the secret of a happy marriage. Without the other half - even if it is the human side - we can never be sure. This part of the secret also emerges very clearly in this chapter.

We can begin with the wealthy Abraham, who lived near God in prayer (verse 40) and for that reason knew that Eliezer would not travel to Haran in vain. The simple slave Eliezer also knew this secret of prayer. The same was true of Betuel and Laban, and precisely the same of the main figures, Rebecca and Isaac.

A solution for the dilemma

The solution of the problem of this chapter (Is your marriage partner chosen by you or for you?) is therefore not *either/or*, but *and*. Your marriage partner is chosen for you and by you through God.

We are thus confronted here, as in so many other fields, by the mystery of human responsibility and Divine sovereignty. This is a profound mystery which we can never comprehend intellectually but which we simply have to accept in faith.

Prayer, however, is the link which links together the work of God and of man. Therefore one can only exercise one's choice and one's responsibility within the framework of prayer.

Self-examination

The great question is therefore whether we still practise prayer. Do parents still pray that their children will find, not necessarily a goodlooking, rich, intelligent marriage partner, but in the first place one intended for the child by God? Do the young people pray for this seriously enough?

Enclosed by prayer

Finally just this. This glorious chapter from the Old Testament would be understood totally wrongly if we were to draw the conclusion from it that prayer is only necessary until we have found the right partner. If one could speak of *more* and of *less* in this instance, then prayer is even *more* important in the marriage that follows. And also afterwards - when your partner has been taken away by death.

Only when the marriage has beforehand, during and afterwards been enclosed by prayer, can God guide us together on the way of true love and of great joy.

May I repeat it once more: Prayer is not only a beseeching for light and for help. Prayer is ultimately thanksgiving. Thanksgiving to God, who in the dawn of creation decided that it would not be good for man to be alone!

Chapter 2

CHRIST AS A WEDDING GUEST

Yesterday and today

(John 2:1-12)

The whole of Cana is seething with life. The children are exuberant. On the face of an old man a smile hovers, there is an unaccustomed sparkle in his eye. The housewife leaves the spinning-wheel, the farmer outspans the ox. The scholar pushes the rolls of the law to one side and pulls closer the wine. It is a wedding!

You all know this *history*. The question is whether we all know the *message* involved in it - also for this joyous day for the bride, the groom, for everybody. At first glance it seems to be a simple story, not a Scriptural passage which one would choose for a *sermon* at a wedding. If, however, we probe more deeply, it becomes so overwhelmingly meaningful that one sermon is not enough to exhaust its riches.

Many questions

Let us begin by asking a few questions. We would like to know *where* exactly the wedding took place. But unfortunately this is not stated - there were no less than three villages called Cana - none too far from Nazareth.

We would like to know *who* the bride and bridegroom were. John, however, does not even provide their names. We wonder in vain what the bride looked like on this important day in her life. In their anonymity, however, they have become symbols of all other bridal couples after them.

We would like to know so many other details. For example, *what time of the year* did they choose for their wedding? Was the Galilean landscape perhaps covered in spring flowers?

In his historiography, however, John is like the painter Rembrandt: only the important things stand in the foreground, the unimportant details are vaguely in the background.

What is the most important fact about this wedding - and all subsequent weddings? The most important is not the bridal couple, but a wedding guest. The fact that Jesus was there!

This immediately evokes a further problem, especially when we read that Christ performed his first miracle here at Cana. Here his public ministry *began*. We would thus expect it to typify his later ministry. And what happens? He changes water to wine - for a group of rural wedding guests who had in all probability already had quite enough to drink. Is this not an unnecessary luxury?

Could He not, in all humility, rather have used his precious time better by healing one of the many sick, blind and paralysed people, or feeding the hungry? And then the excess: between 300 and 600 litres of wine!

Christ is clearly different, and his gospel is different from our stereotyped ideas. We tend to link Christian faith with the serious, even the sad instead of with the joyful and the cheerful. Christ in his first miracle reproaches us for this.

We are not the only ones to be surprised, however. Christ's first six disciples had been invited to the wedding-feast with Him, and they were even more astounded. They had been disciples of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ.

For John holiness and a life which would please God consisted of withdrawing from the world. Far from the towns and cities he lived in isolation from the world on the edge of the desert. He had more than enough time for thought and reflection. In contrast to the usual minister of religion he did not seek out people, but they came to him with their problems and their questions. He did not know rich meals, for when he was not fasting he ate locusts and wild honey. He stayed away from wine on principle (Luke 15:1). His preaching was like his life, serious expiatory preaching: Convert, lament your sins, or God's judgment will be upon you!

I doubt whether any bridal couple would have considered inviting this serious bachelor in his camel-hair clothes and leather belt to their wedding - and even if they had done it John probably would not have come. People gossiped and said that because John did not want to eat and drink, he was possessed by the Devil (Matthew 11:18). John did this, however,

because it fitted in with the commission and the message that he had received. The nation first had to mourn and convert themselves before they could celebrate about the Messiah.

How different is Christ! We do not serve the Lord by *withdrawing* from life, but by *changing* life. John says that we forfeited everything through sin. Christ says that we can regain it all through his love. Eating and drinking and loving as such are not sinful. These are gifts from God (1 Timothy 4:4). If the followers of John then ask Christ why He does not fast (Matthew 9:14) He responds by asking (verse 15): "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?"

We see the same in the little-known parable of Christ in Matthew 11:16-19 in which Christ compares his actions with those of John. John's actions make us think of a dirge, but Christ's of a cheerful wedding song. John does not eat or drink, but Christ does.

Our questioning has brought us somewhere. We can now begin to understand why Christ *began* his public ministry at a wedding and performed his *first* miracle there. Why?

The answer

The answer in the first place lies in the fact that He was invited. If more people wanted to welcome Christ as a guest on their wedding day, there might be more hope for happy marriages.

In the second place our marriage formulary is also correct in saying that Christ went to the wedding at Cana precisely because He did not despise marriage as an institution but rather regarded it highly.

As mentioned at the beginning, the greatest wealth to be found in this simple story has not been discovered yet. One could say that this history has various levels, layers, depths or dimensions.

The true reason why Christ attends the simple wedding is clearly revealed in Scripture: "He ... manifested his glory" (verse 11). What could be meant by that?

Christ's glory indicates his being elevated, having majesty, dignity, greatness and power, indicates his being truly God. John earlier on in chapter 1 verse 14 speaks of Christ's glory. And here, in the second chapter of his gospel, he describes how this glory visibly manifested itself for the first time.

How does Christ manifest his glory? In three ways:

- * Through his wedding gift: wine, quantities of wine - quality wine
- * Through the inversion of the existing order/tradition
- * Through bringing people to faith in Him.

Here we now reach the hard core, the deepest dimension, the glorious message. Now we will be able to drink real, living water. In this simple story we find the whole of the gospel in a nutshell.

*** Christ changes water into wine**

Whoever meets Christ is always surprised. Here at Cana too. He does not attend the wedding to read the sermon (this is done by the master of ceremonies, the governor of the wedding). No, He is here to provide the wine.

We know that weddings were not half-day affairs in those days. They easily lasted seven days (cf. Judges 14:12), and even longer. Song, music, dance, and all sorts of food were plentiful. One thing, however, was essential, and that was wine. A wedding without wine - enough wine - would not be regarded as a proper wedding.

When the wine thus ran out at Cana (there might have been too little to begin with, or more guests than had been expected had turned up), the groom suffered no small embarrassment. It was not only a disgrace, it was a disaster, because this would subdue or even dry up the festive spirit.

And weeks, months later, the bridal couple would still have to contend with the malicious gossip about their feeble wedding!

We can thus understand Mary's worry well enough when she said to Him quietly that they had no more wine. In her request, however, there is also a temptation: that He should have to reveal Himself at a time not really determined by the Father. Wine had always in Israel carried the meaning of a symbol of the advent of the Messiah. (When in Egypt God changed water into blood, it was a sign of his anger. When Christ at Cana changed water into wine, it was a sign of blessing and of the Kingdom of the Messiah.) A wonder with wine would therefore really reverberate as a messianic miracle. It could lead to a real shake-up in the strongly Zealotic-oriented Galilee. Thus Christ's express yet not disrespectful admonition to Mary. (The word *woman* was a general form of address and Christ therefore did not mean to snub her by the way in which He addressed her). His reply to her held the promise that, when his hour came, He would do something.

With his miracle Christ saved the bridegroom embarrassment and saved the joyous occasion. The wedding turned into a renewal of celebration!

In this same way love is the essence of marriage, the essential element which ensures that marriage - years after the wedding - will remain a celebration. And this love (different from *being in love*) can not be supplied out of our own resources. Solomon's Song says rightly that it is a flame lit by God (8.6, KJV), a *most vehement flame*. It will die down, therefore, if not maintained by Christ.

Wherever Christ is, the most ordinary things, like water, change into something great, wonderful, special, delicious - like wine.

The remarkable (which we have pointed out in passing) is that Christ did not supply a few extra litres of wine, but wine in abundance.

This is also typical of his work. He is not miserly, but gives freely of his mercy and blessings to those who obey Him. He came to us, after all, that we might live in plenty.

We could not expect anything else from our Saviour. He gives quality as well as quantity. This emerges from the light reproach addressed to the groom by the governer of the wedding feast, who whispered that it was customary to set out the best wine first and the inferior wine later (verse 10) Because it was not unusual at all at Eastern weddings for the guests

to become roaring drunk, it was the custom to serve the good vintages first and to keep the indifferent wines later to dulled palates.

Whoever trusts in the real Saviour can expect only the best and the most genuine. This is true for your marriage and for all other fields and spheres of life.

Do remember, however, that you receive what you do because He bought it dearly with his blood. The wine which He poured so freely at Cana was not only a sign of joy but also a prophecy of suffering.

Christ, however, reveals his glory even more clearly:

*** Christ inverts, overturns the existing order**

This miracle is a sign, and therefore signifies something more profound. What it indicates we find in the surprise of the governor of the wedding. If we were to look for a sermon text, a message, at the wedding at Cana, we find only the admonition that one usually serves the good wine first and the indifferent wine later - but the groom in this case is reproached for having retained the best wine until last. This is a sermon consisting of one sentence only, but in that sentence the essence of Christ's redemptive work is contained, and his programme for life indicated. Quite unawares the governor of the wedding feast at Cana revealed the essence of history with this simple little sentence!

The history of man *began* well, it began with a wedding and Adam's nuptial song (Genesis 2:23), but it very soon *ends* in disaster. (Eve seduces Adam and Adam reproaches the Lord for having given him such a wife!) We always put our best foot forward at the beginning of the marriage, but then we are confronted with disillusionment, and degeneration. Many marriages therefore *end* in divorce or even murder.

Christ, by assuming humanity, begins in this corrupted state, in this misery, but He ends in glory. The order of events for Him is not joy-misery, light-darkness, life-death, but exactly the converse: from misery to joy, from darkness to light, from death to life.

Because we are sinful, fallen people, no marriage can remain glorious and fresh. Christ alone can renew it daily, replace the old order by a new one.

Cana stands like a beacon between the first paradise (Eden) and the second paradise (the new earth) where everything would be new (Revelation 21:5). What Christ does at this simple wedding is a premonition, a sign, of his great renewal of everything: man, earth and heaven.

Creation begins with a wedding. At Cana Christ gives a clear sign of his renewing work. And on the new earth we will be able to sit at the table with Him and enjoy the great wedding feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7-9). Then we can, with Christ, drink the new wine of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 26:29).

For those bound to Him, the end will always be more beautiful and glorious than the beginning, the last better than the first. Where Christ enters, the dirty water is emptied from the vats, and they are filled with good wine. The old dispensation is replaced by the new!

*** Christ leads people to faith in Him**

This is the third way in which Christ clearly manifests his glory, his divinity. He did not only or in the first place come to Cana to save the groom from embarrassment through changing water into wine. No, He did this so that his disciples should believe in Him.

And his disciples are not only surprised - they believe. Perhaps one should say that their faith is strengthened, because they have already heard from John Who Christ is. When Christ called them, they believed in his words. And now their faith can be anchored through his miracle.

Faith: The final, deepest certitude for man's life. Our firm anchor.

If the Lord blesses us with the wine of marital happiness, may this serve to strengthen the bond with Him.

I close with a question: When is a marriage worthwhile? The answer is to be found in the light of the foregoing, and is simple: If it is such that the glory of Christ is revealed in it.

How can this be made to happen?

Simply by believing in Him. Because when we believe in Him, then He inverts the normal course of our marriages (first good, then bad, first beautiful, then ugly) into a matter of the longer the marriage, the better, the older the marriage, the more beautiful. Then He offers us the wine of love, of the best quality, in plenty.

The most fundamental secret of marital fidelity, until death do us part, is therefore supremely simple: Be true to God!

Chapter 3

THE SECRET OF MARRIAGE

(Song of Songs 8:6,7)

"Wear me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion cruel as the grave; it blazes up like blazing fire, fiercer than any flame. Many waters cannot quench love, no flood can sweep it away; if a man were to offer for love the whole wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned"

Songs chapter 8 offers the closing scene of the drama: the beautiful Shulammitte maiden and her shepherd friend meet under the same apple tree in the orchard where their love for each other first started. It is a passionate reunion after a long period of separation. The Eastern potentate, Solomon, on one of his journeys saw her beauty and took her along to become part of his harem, but this did not succeed because the Shulammitte maiden did not succumb to his wealth and flattery but remained true to her own beloved.

Now they meet again, and soon they will in marriage be united for ever. On occasions like this dramatic meeting many words are redundant. Only the essential things are said. Through the words of the Shulammitte maiden God also reveals to us the essence of marital love, the deepest secret underlying it. There had to be a secret behind the fidelity of the woman to enable her not even to succumb to Solomon (the man who counted his "wives" in the hundreds). How love between man and woman is represented here reveals the secret also to us.

Love is not something sinful

By saying what something is *not*, one can already deduce a great deal.

In the first place the love between husband and wife is, according to *Songs*, not sinful, contemptible or inferior. The sexual side of marriage is presented

here with almost shocking openness. The two lovers admire each other's physical beauty (cf. for example 7:1-3) without being shy about it.

This should be so, because man is a creature of God, and God created man good and beautiful. He created man and woman in such a way that they can become one physically.

Christ also did not, as a Roman priest might do, create distance between himself and marriage. He started his public appearances by honouring the wedding at Cana with his presence and by saving the festive occasion when He changed water into wine. (See previous chapter).

The love between a man and a woman is something natural, beautiful and pure. *Songs* sings a hymn of praise to the intimacy of this love (cf. 2:6).

It cannot be enforced

In the second place love is not forced but spontaneous. Love may not be stimulated artificially. One cannot be forced to love or to be loved.

The wise Solomon did not realize this.

The Shulamite maiden, however, realized this clearly. Her protest against Solomon's actions is repeated three times as a refrain in *Songs*: "I charge you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the spirits and the goddesses of the field: Do not rouse her, do not disturb my love until she is ready" (2:7; 3:5 and 8:4). Solomon with all his wealth and splendour could buy everything - except love. He tried, but once again he is spurned by the contempt of the Shulamite maiden, who says that even if a man should give all his money to buy love, he would be deeply despised.

Love cannot be enforced or bought, because it is a gift, the most precious of all gifts. It is brought to expression in the words that love "overcomes" one without being consciously sought.

Love is not sinful, but is something precious and beautiful, not forced, but spontaneous.

What else does *Song of Songs* tell us about love?

It is glorious

It is something great, glorious and wonderful. This book in the Old Testament which describes marital love did not by accident get the name *Song of Songs*. Here there is singing not by Solomon in his flattering language, but by the faithful Shulammite maiden and her faithful friend. Wherever there is talk in the Bible of love, there is rejoicing. 1 Corinthians 13 is also a hymn sung by Paul.

Tremendous

Song of Songs also hymns the power and intensity of love. In order to stress the power and immovability of love the Shulammite maiden compares it with the most powerful elements conceivable. It devours like fire, the power of water can eliminate anything, except love. Nothing evades death - except love. Paul says that love is stronger than death. It reaches across boundaries.

How powerful the strengths are that are liberated by love could be expressed in terms of many examples from history. Think of Jacob, who worked for seven years to win Rachel, and when he was deceived, was willing to work for another seven years. And then we read that in his eyes this was like days - because he loved her. And the same was probably true of Rachel, who waited for Jacob for so long - and so faithfully.

Love creates an invincible person, strong as granite. It is not love, but hatred which can turn a man into a weakling.

We cannot explain the intimacy, spontaneity and intensity of the love between man and woman simply at the human level - for example, in psychological terms. There has to be a deeper secret behind it, otherwise it remains an inexplicable mystery.

The secret

Solomon. Before him and after him nobody had his wisdom; the man who created thousands of proverbs; someone who could resolve complex riddles of life and problems for others. And yet - he did not know the secret of marital love, or he might have forgotten it. He might have forgotten it because he had forgotten God in his marital life.

The Shulammitte maiden - a simple, unsophisticated girl from the countryside. With her feminine intuition and child-like faith, however, she penetrates to the foundation of the mystery and tells the secret to us as well - people of the twentieth century with our many marital problems. It is the only way in which she could explain her own fidelity in the fire of temptation (in the presence of the polygamous Solomon):

"Love is a flame of the Lord!"

One can also translate as follows: "... love is as strong as death, the vigour of love is hard as the empire of death, its glow is a fire, the flame of the Lord."

A flame of the LORD. Do we realize what that means? It means that God today still lights the flame of love between man and woman. He offers it to them as a gift. The marriage formulary says that He leads them to each other by his own hand.

This means that in love we have to do not only with each other, but with the great God Himself. Sentimental, vulgar romanticism does not fit in here, because love itself is terribly serious. This flame offers warmth, but one can also be burnt by it.

Love, however, is not in itself a god - it is a gift of God, and may therefore never be elevated to the status of an idol.

A double secret

But why, could you ask, are there so many failed marriages? There might be diverse reasons for that, but in the light of the *Song of Songs* it might be because we have failed to see the other side of the mystery.

God's gifts to man also imply duties. The Shulammitte maiden knew that this was also true of marital happiness. She gives away the second part of the secret in the form of an urgent request to her future bridegroom:

"Wear me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm"

We as Westerners no longer wear a seal (or a signet ring) close by our hearts, on our upper arms or in noses or ears, but the symbolism of the

signet ring has remained: fidelity has been sworn to someone else. The closed nature of the ring indicates that there is no room for more than two in this love relationship.

This exclusive character of the true love between man and wife is also stressed in two other verses: 2:16, which says that "My beloved is mine and I am his", and in 6:3, which says that "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine".

A final secret

Marriage: for two only - apart from the essential third one, viz. God Trinitarian. Because God not only lights the light of love, He keeps it burning.

This is essential, because Satan is still there. We cannot (at least for now) disregard him in anything. He knows very well that love is the most precious possession that God has given to mankind, and therefore his attacks will be most vicious in this area. He will do anything in his power to destroy this glorious gift of love and to replace it with a cheaper surrogate or even hatred. Because we are sinful people, he also succeeds often ... unless the bond of love is stronger than he might have thought. It can only be too strong for Satan if our bond with God is strong enough. Two people - even if they should love each other strongly initially - can not keep on loving each other unto death unless they also love God with all their hearts.

Faith in God makes the bond of love between husband and wife unbreakable.

God grants us the strength of his Holy Spirit to keep us standing, as it did the Shulamite maiden and her beloved.

But - remember! - the secret has two sides: God grants the strength of his Spirit only to those who pray for it without ceasing, and also offer thanks for it every day. The prayer is the oil which will sustain the flame of love which has been lit by God.

True love between man and woman, according to *Song of Songs*, therefore, is:

- * intimate, not despicable
- * spontaneous, not forced
- * intense, cannot be quenched
- * exclusive, no room for others

The deepest secret behind this intimacy, spontaneity, intensity and exclusivity, however, remains God Himself.

Solomon, the wise, had forgotten the secret.

Each of us often forgets it.

The flame of love is blanked, it flickers and becomes dim, and threatens to die.

Those who are so privileged as to know the deep secret, will be acting like fools if they do not at once flee to Christ, our Bridegroom. He can make the flame of love burn more brightly again, so that light and warmth can be all around us.

With his help marriage can (again) become a song - a song of songs!

Chapter 4

BEING MARRIED IS NOT EVERYTHING

(1 Corinthians 7:38)

"... Thus, he who marries his partner does well, and he who does not will do better"

The marital distress (of both believers and unbelievers) today makes it very urgent to ask about the will of God with regard to marriage. Advice in this regard is provided by many people and institutions. So often, however, this does not touch upon the core of the problem and cannot truly offer advice. Nobody knows our problems better than the omnipotent God. When in his Word He speaks we have to listen, because He knows what the problems are, where they come from and how they can be solved. We also have to listen very carefully to such a difficult chapter as 1 Corinthians 7.

The background

Paul in this chapter deals with the cries of distress of the Corinthian believers with regard to marriage. It is to be understood that they should have had problems with marriage. Corinth at this time was a prosperous international commercial centre. It was situated close by an isthmus with two ports, one on the eastern side and the other on the western side. In this cosmopolitan city, where merchants, fortune-hunters and religious teachers and thinkers from all over the world congregated, the goddess Aphrodite was adhered to so that all sorts of immoral practices had made this city notorious because of its licentious ways. In this corrupt, sex-obsessed world there were also Christians asking Paul's advice because they found it hard to remain standing in the midst of all the temptations.

Paul's answer - even if at first glance rather obscure - is still very topical today, because we find ourselves in a world in which the sexual is idolized as perhaps never before.

Disappointing advice

If we hear what Paul has to say, we are rather disappointed. To say the least, one would find difficulty using one of the texts in this chapter for a wedding sermon. He says, for example, that it is not good for a man to touch a woman (verse 1). He wishes that all people could rather be like him - that is, unmarried. It is good for a person to remain unmarried (verse 26). In our text the counsel to the father or parents of a marriageable daughter is (older translation): "... So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well, but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better".

The right address?

It would seem that we have come to the wrong address for advice. What Paul has to say reminds us more of the embittered words of a confirmed bachelor and mysogynist than a man of God. According to him marriage would seem to be a necessary evil or a special favour (verse 6) as a result of the clear lack of self-control of most people: "It is better to marry than to burn with desire" (verse 9).

It would not be very fair if Paul with regard to his personal experience also wanted to force us to follow his negative, ascetic point of view. It would also not offer any solution for those who are already married. Does it make any sense to say to married people "... from now on those who have spouses should also act as if they did not?"

How could Paul write something like this to the Corinthians - and to us - and be helpful? More seriously: It is truly the Word of God (through Paul) which we are hearing here? Is the Roman Church not perhaps right with its doctrine of the celibate? Would we not have done better to have become nuns and monks instead of marrying?

The situation gets even more troublesome when Paul elsewhere writes in exactly the opposite terms about marriage. He even uses it as a symbol of the relationship between Christ and his bridal Church. From the rest of the Bible too we have to deduce that marriage is a good institution of God, as even a whole book, with the striking title *Song of Songs* describes marital love as something normal, beautiful and wonderful. If we read 1 Corinthians 7 immediately after *Song of Songs*, it reminds one of the embittered reaction following a disastrous relationship.

The solution

The only solution is that we reread and read more properly what Paul really has to say. We have to keep in mind who it is that Paul is writing to here, and what the exact problems are that he had to face.

In Corinth the sexual, which is an inherent part of the marital relationship, was over-stressed and idolized. When something in creation is absolutized, it becomes ugly and man becomes its slave. This also happened here in Corinth in the field of the moral, where all sorts of perversities came into being. Some Christians in Corinth decided out of reaction that it would be better not to marry at all. Perhaps they could in support of their decision quote certain Greek thinkers who regarded the sexual and physical life as something inferior as against the so-called higher spiritual life of man.

Two extreme viewpoints

Paul is thus confronted with the problem that the sexual and marriage are over-estimated by some in Corinth and underestimated by others. For Paul neither of the viewpoints represents a solution in line with the will of God. Fleeing from the problems by remaining unmarried does not constitute a solution - in any event, not for most people, because only some of them had the gift of abstinence. Paul thus says that there is nothing wrong with marriage as such, for in marrying one does not sin (verse 28).

When Paul then does recommend marriage in this passage, it is not because he regards marriage as something lower or sinful as such. The unmarried are not of necessity the saints and the married the sinners. Paul does not elevate the unmarried state above the married, because he says that it is good, right or beautiful to marry (verse 38).

That he says in the same verse that it is *better* not to marry, might give the impression that the unmarried state is higher or at least preferable. It might, however, not be regarded as a general rule for all people of all times - Paul's advice is meant *specifically for the congregation of Corinth* in which moral decay had assumed enormous proportions.

The relationship between man and wife was idolized instead of there being an awareness that marital life was seen as a special means towards the service and glorification of God. In the language of Paul: Instead of the

concern of the marital partners being primarily to please God through their togetherness, they were only concerned with pleasing each other. There is nothing wrong with giving pleasure to each other (it is only necessary to read the *Song of songs* to realize this), but if this becomes the be-all and end-all of marriage, marriage itself becomes god, and then there is no room any more for God. Thus the Lord sends his judgment by making man and woman slaves of their self-made god. Satan knows exactly how to let man become entangled in his lusts. And finally, in spite of all the stimulants and the sexual techniques, the lusts cannot be satisfied any longer and the senselessness of the hunt for pleasure appears.

What is most important

Now we understand better Paul's advice about not marrying. Through this advice he could very sharply state to the Corinthians that marriage is not the most important thing in life. He relativized marriage and what goes with it in the light of the kingdom of God, which is more important and which demands more of us. In *all* we do - marriage too - the concern may not be with us, but with the honour and the glory of God. By following Paul's advice those who do have the gift of abstinence and did not marry could show signs of protest against the absolutization of this aspect of life. They could let their total devotion in their service to God act as bright beacons of light to remind mankind of what is really important in life: *the service of God and not of ourselves*.

Anything which brings division between us and God should be moved out of the way. It can also be our possessions. For that reason the Lord Jesus ordered the young man to sell all his possessions and to give all to the poor. Christ also says that those who love a mother or a father or whatever more than Him cannot be His true follower. It is no wonder that marriage, in which we live together most intimately, should also be used by Satan to estrange us from the Lord.

Paul's realism

Initially it thus seemed as if Paul had nothing to say to married people, because he advised the Corinthians to prefer the unmarried state. Now that we have listened more carefully, we realize that we do not have to do with an embittered bachelor or an ascetic.

Paul is very realistic. He realizes that marriage is something preliminary, because even if we live together for many years as married people, it is really very brief. And we have to realize what is most important: to help each other to serve the Lord more fully and not to serve ourselves. Should it become necessary, the marital partners should even on occasion and with mutual consent withdraw from each other for purposes of fasting and prayer.

Paul realizes that marriage brings about many cares, because we live in a world that has fallen into sin. It was not easy for the Corinthians to live holily like children of the Lord in a generation twisted by sin. This is also very true of the world in which we live today and which is going down because of its immorality.

In a nutshell

In a nutshell the message of 1 Corinthians 7 is the following: Through the gift of abstinence some Corinthians could bear testimony to what is important in the life of a Christian, which is total devotion to God. Being allowed to marry is also, however, a gift of the Lord. It is a great gift of grace that the Lord should, as is said in the marriage formulary, lead two people to come together. Our task is to use this gift which God grants us in the right way, and to carry out the same message as those who followed Paul's advice which he brought to the Corinthians: It is not by fleeing from marriage and its problems, but within the confines of a blessed marriage that we have to testify to that which makes life worth living: the service, honour and glory of God.

It is only through the grace of God that it is possible to have such a marriage. In such a marriage He and us can take joy as He bestows blessings generously on such a husband and wife.

Blessed are those who know this deep secret of marital happiness and who live in accordance with it.

A SONG ABOUT REAL LOVE

Chapter 5

THE BEST WAY OF ALL

(1 Corinthians 13)

Chapter 13 of the Epistle to the Corinthians is not simply a casual chapter which has been inserted into Paul's exposition about the special gifts (*charismata*). It forms an integral part of his whole argumentation.

Unity in spite of diversity

The trend of thought in chapter 12 is that there is a variety of spiritual gifts, such as prophecy, government, speaking in tongues, the power to heal. This *diversity* should be acknowledged and not lead to separation but rather to co-operation towards the glorification of the one body of Christ. Nobody should think that his/her gifts are not needed. By the same token nobody should think that he/she alone is the whole body of Christ.

We find here the well-known Biblical principle (which can be applied in so many fields) of variety in unity, and vice versa, unity in diversity. Over-emphasis on either is wrong. Diversity at the cost of unity becomes separation. Unity at the cost of diversity becomes monotony.

Because the Corinthians in this case tended to over-emphasize the diversity (each prided himself on his own gifts and considered these to be the one and all) Paul had to draw their attention to this in chapter 12.

The most excellent of all

In chapter 13 he comes up with a new idea - not that of the *unity* in the diversity, but of excellence. There is something, love, which exceeds all the mentioned gifts in value. Love is more important than all the gifts the Corinthians pride themselves on as regards indispensability, excellence and immortality.

Everything ... or nothing

The careful reader will note how often Paul uses the contrasting statement of "everything ... nothing".

"I may be able to speak the languages of men and even of angels (that is, *all possible languages*) ...but if I have no love ... my speech is *no more* than a clanging bell".

"I may have *all* knowledge and understand *all* secrets ... but if I have no love, I am *nothing*".

"I may give away *everything* I have, ... but if I have *no* love, this does me *no good*".

"Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail".

All the gifts will disappear, *only* love will remain.

One has to make a choice here: either everything, or nothing. An in-between position is not possible.

Division and structure

We can divide Paul's hymn of praise on love into three main sections:

1. The *indispensability* of love (verses 1-3)
2. The *excellence of love* (verses 4-7)
3. The *permanence* and *immortality* of love (verses 8-13)

Each of these can be divided up further as follows:

The Indispensability of love (verses 1-3)

In a rising line the following can be mentioned:

- * tongues (languages) (verse 1)

* prophecies (verse 2)

* generosity, sacrifice (verse 3)

Each of these verses has been structured in such a way that there is a rising line ("... the language of *men* and of *angels*..."), followed by a break ("... but if I have no love ..." - the same refrain in all the cases), and then a fall (which indicates something without love is worthless).

The excellence of love (verses 4-7)

This section opens with two positive statements about what love is like (patient and kind). These are followed by eight negative statements (last section of verse 4 to end of verse 6) which all indicate what love is *not*. The conclusion (verse 7) is once more positive about what love *is*.

We can divide these ten characteristics of love into pairs.

Positive: patient and kind

Negative: not jealous and conceited and proud

not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable

love does not keep a record of wrongs

love is not happy with evil

This is followed by more positive aspects of love:

Positive: love never gives up

its faith, hope and patience never fail

It is as if Paul in this section has to pile the one verb on to the other in order to be able to outline the excellence of love.

The Immortality of love (verses 8-13)

Paul in the third section of his song returns to the first section (on the indispensability of love) in which he also dealt with prophecies, knowledge and languages. These are things which are not permanent, which do not last into eternity.

In opposition to this, he mentions three things which will last: faith, hope and love.

Our division here is thus along the lines of the *partial, imperfect, transient*, as opposed to the *perfect, complete, immortal*:

The things which will not last (verses 8-12)

- * prophetic gifts - their usefulness passes
- * languages - will cease
- * knowledge - only partial

The things which are immortal (verse 13)

- * faith
- * hope
- * love

The number three

It is striking what role is played by the number *three* in the whole setup of this hymn:

- * *Three* main sections: the indispensability, excellence and immortality of love.
- * In the *three* verses about the indispensability of love *three* phases each time: a rising line, a break and a fall.

* In the section about the excellence of love, *three* phases: positive, negative, positive.

* In the section about the immortality of love *three* things which wither away, as against *three* which last.

Chapter 6

THE INDISPENSABILITY OF LOVE

(1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

The apostle also uses the form to convey to us the content and to let this sink in. In each of these three verses (which outline the indispensability of love) we find three parts: a rising line, a break and a disintegration. We can call each of these three verses a wave of the stream which flows down the mountain. The rising line in each verse moves to a climax. The three verses together - as we will see - also move towards a climax. The waves become bigger and the fall more precipitous. The stream which runs down the mountain moves faster and faster all the time.

Verse 1

I may speak in tongues of men or of angels, but if I am without love I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

It is important to note that the apostle uses the first person singular: "I". However, while he does say "I", he really means "us" or even more strongly, "You", Corinthians, who are so loveless towards each other.

Here we see once again that 1 Corinthians 13 is not a random chapter, but a fiery protest against the lovelessness of the Corinthians which has been so sharply outlined in the previous chapters. In order to temper his reproach somewhat - he has good insight in pastoral psychology! - he uses the first person form "I". Had he said "You" to their faces, the proud Corinthians might not have gone on listening to him. Now he does not try to *convince* them but only tries to *testify* to the transcendence, the excellence and the immutability of love.

1. Rising line - "I may speak in tongues of men ..."

In this he refers to the glossolalia of which the Corinthians were so proud.
and of angels ...

The wave mounts higher. Paul does not maintain that the angels also speak languages, but only pushes his statement to the furthest possible consequence. He is asking the Corinthians to try to imagine for themselves speaking the languages of both heaven and earth.

2. Break: "... but if I am without love..."

In the original Greek Paul does not use an article (*the*) next to the word love. The concept "love" is therefore used here in the general sense, and without any specific application. From the rest of the chapter it also emerges that love should here be seen in its full consequences: it is love of both God and neighbour.

In verse 4 the article is used. In this case love is personified, and represented as a(n active) person. Paul does not write an abstract treatise on "love" - he is interested in the individual who has to love.

It is important to note the Greek word that Paul uses for "love", viz. *agape*. He does not use the word *filia* (which has more to do with friendship) or *eros* (which indicates sexual attraction towards the opposite sex, sensual passion - remember that Corinth was the city of Aphrodite). The latter was the most general word used for love. Paul expressly uses a *new* word to indicate that the love intended here is a totally different sort of love.

The love of which Paul talks here has its source in God and lasts until eternity. It is not like *eros*, the sensual passion, which is soon over.

It is important we note what the apostle wishes to clarify at this point because love has become a popular word. Practically anything is regarded as love: egotism, infatuation, sexual promiscuity, etc. But *real* love is missing.

The apostle sings very specifically about God's love for us and the true love which we are commanded to show our fellowmen.

3. Fall: "...I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal ..."

Paul uses this image to express what he would be without love. (The time expression in Greek also indicates that he would not simply become this but stay this way.)

The first image indicates a sounding copper instrument and the second is an onomatopoeic word for a loudly-sounding cymbal.

The intention is not to set glossolalia with and glossolalia without love against each other, but to compare glossolalia as such with love.

These musical instruments, also used in heathen religions, do give sound, but no more. The image suggests that the glossolalian who has no love is no more than a striking but uninspired instrument which does make noise but has no heart. (The Greek expression used here was also used for braggarts who do not really achieve anything.)

Paul therefore wishes to say that even the miracle languages with which the first congregation was endowed (but also ordinary language - one of the most wonderful gifts man has) are nothing more than noise, because language without love is hollow, an empty tin which simply makes noise.

Paul does not regard speaking in tongues as being inferior. But he wishes to stress the indispensability of love - in the use of language also. *All* our deeds have to be tested against love. All excellent gifts are without value when they do not emanate from a heart filled with love.

A certain commentator has commented that the point of agreement between glossolalia without love and the instruments mentioned does not lie in the noise which they make but that the sound of these instruments is without melody. In the same way speaking in tongues without love does not have meaning.

Verse 2

I may have the gift of prophecy, and know every hidden truth; I may have faith strong enough to move mountains; but if I have no love I am nothing.

1. Rising line: "I may have the gift of prophecy ..."

Paul here strives after even higher gifts. Prophecy is regarded by him (in terms of chapters 12 and 14) as the highest of the special gifts. This wave is higher than the first one (verse 1) but also lasts longer: "... and know

every hidden truth ..." meaning that all that has been hidden is now known, for knowledge of hidden truth meant a study of revelation - Matthew 13:11. (The word *knowledge* in Greek was a less intellectualist concept than we give to it.) It is regarded as a special gift of God. We therefore have to think here of a special knowledge of the things of God's kingdom.

The apostle mounts one step higher: "... I may have faith strong enough to move mountains ...". Faith is here seen as an extraordinary gift to do wonders - a faith which can even move mountains (cf. Matthew 17:20 and Luke 17:6),

Note especially the stress on the fact that all these gifts are held in the perfect form, as strongly as languages in verse 1.

2. Break: "... but I have no love ..."

3. Fall: "... I am nothing ..."

The Greek for "then I am nothing" is only two words. The unexpected brevity of the sentence with which this verse ends constitutes a contrast with the piling up of thoughts in the foregoing sentences (the rising line).

The fall is not only more abrupt but also deeper than in the first verse. The contrast is stronger than in verse 1. There Paul was at least something even if he did not have love (a noisy instrument). By now being without love is equated with being nothing at all.

In a strange way the words "to have" and "to be" are confused with each other: The man who owns a great deal also is something, while the poor one is not counted, because he has nothing!

This is terrible logic. Paul intimates that man can have all sorts of wonderful gifts and yet be nothing, be great in the eyes of men but nothing in the sight of God, who can see more deeply than man can.

This is a stunning truth. Somebody who has love might well be nothing in the eyes of the world and still be everything in the eyes of the Lord. Paul does not hesitate long to answer the question as to what he would be without love. He answers: NOTHING. We must shudder in the face of that, because *nothing* is exactly that, and we can't go lower.

Love is even indispensable for faith. Faith without works, without deeds of love, is a dead faith, mere outward show. Paul here repeats what Christ has already said. Some people will say on Judgement Day: "Lord, did we not in your name prophesize (or preach) or drive out devils and do many things?" And then the Lord will say to them: "I never knew you. Go away from here, you who commit injustice."

Verse 3

I may dole out all I possess, or even give my body to be burnt, but if I have no love, I am none the better.

1. Rising line: "I may dole out all I possess ..."

The wave mounts higher. As if we have not been convinced of the indispensability of love, this verse also follows.

The apostle here does not talk about the *charismata* any longer, but of a special expression of love. He mentions deeds that are of great value, because they seem to represent true love. They are "resounding vices" (Calvin) however, because they emanate from the wrong root. The congregation might benefit from them, but the person who does them does not.

Note once again that nothing is retained. The Greek word that is used here literally means to break into fragments or crumbs. It does not say explicitly that it is a division for the sake of the poor, but from the context it might be derived that Paul was thinking of that. Here we think of the highest expression of "love" towards our neighbour.

But Paul takes it to the highest climax: "... give my body to be burnt ..."

When Paul was writing these words, the commentators state, there was still no question of the persecution or the burning of Christians. The words therefore have to be understood hypothetically. Paul might have been thinking of Daniel 3:19-28, where Daniel's three friends are mentioned, who were willing to die for the sake of the Lord, or of Stephen, who was willing to die for his faith by being stoned, while Paul looked on.

The text does not offer the motive behind the giving of one's life, but we can still derive from the context that this had to be for the sake of the Lord.

In the sharing of the possessions with the poor Paul sets the highest possible utterance of love towards the neighbour next to the highest utterance of love towards God. Paul states the utmost that can be done to the neighbour (give all my *possessions*) and God (give my own *life*).

If you do good to others in order to be seen by men, this does not help at all. It should not be done in order to feel good about yourself. It should be done out of a deep sense of humility and true love towards your neighbour - and God.

If someone dies on the stake, with the intention of proving his own worth, then it is in vain. If the concern, however, is with God and not with the self, then it is not in vain.

2. Break: "... but I have no love ..."

For the third time this is repeated like a refrain, to make sure that it penetrates.

3. Fall: "... I am none the better ..."

Even if I should shed everything, even myself, for the sake of the wrong motives, I would have no profit, no reward from God.

In the eyes of the people this would be something awesome. Paul warns the Corinthians, however. They were vain and proud, important in their own eyes, and wanted to brag about themselves. (Cf. how they made sure people knew about their gifts of speaking in tongues - even though this might be unintelligible to the hearers.) They wanted to be seen by God and man. Like the Pharisees they blew their own trumpet (Matthew 6:1-5), they wanted to draw attention to them and did not do deeds of love in such a way that the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing. For that reason it amounted to the opposite of what had been intended, thus selfishness.

Charity without love thus amounts to a grabbing for personal gratification and honour.

One feels faint when one thinks that it is not enough to die as a martyr - that it is possible to offer oneself without true love!

Somebody may sacrifice himself because he loves himself so much! This might sound paradoxical, but it shows the deceitfulness of the human heart.

God sees more deeply than man, and He sees these things (as He did in the case of Annanias and Sapphira). He rewards only good deeds committed out of love. Poverty and martyrdom in themselves have no value for Him.

Love first - this gives value to what we do!

God does not count our deeds, He weighs them.

Great deeds without love do not help at all - they rather remove you further from God. Small deeds of love, which the world might not even notice, are possibly great deeds in the eyes of God, and will bring us nearer to Him.

One hesitates to think of this: it is possible that somebody who has meant a great deal for the kingdom of God might not himself enter into it. (He might simply have been an instrument in the hand of God, like Pharaoh and Augustus.)

The eldest son in the parable of the prodigal son meant a great deal for the farming activities of the father, but nothing for his father's heart. Although he worked very hard and dutifully, he did it without love, and therefore he was never truly a child but a hired worker. The father knew his labour but not his heart. For that reason he becomes the prodigal son!

God does not allow Himself to be bought off cheaply by a large amount of work spoiled through the lack of love. We should not think that the quality of spoilt meat will improve if we add more of the same type of meat to it. A thousand times something which is bad does not make it better, only worse. A thousand deeds without love is never one deed of love ... all our activities without love are dangerous.

We should never try to bribe off God with all sorts of achievements, with great activities and noise in every terrain of life ... in order to hide our lack of love.

This well-known hymn about love is therefore at one and the same time as lovely as a spring morning - and as sharp as a razor.

Calvin adds to this the thought that God not only does not reward us, but also that it is an insult to God to try and deceive Him with loveless deeds, because then we forget that He knows our hearts and knows our motives.

Whoever is loveless is godless, because God is love.

We can recapitulate verses 1-3 in the following image: As with waves that break noisily (verse 1), to nothing (verse 2) and recede impotently from the beach (verse 3), the apostle wants to make us aware of how senseless life is without love (W.J. Snyman).

Love is irreplaceable.

Here the first section of the New Testament Song of Songs closes, after singing the praises of the indispensability of love. This brings us to the second section of the song, which sings about the *excellence* of love.

Chapter 7

THE EXCELLENCE OF LOVE

(1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

In the previous verses (1-3) there was a fall, as the Jordan pours down the slopes of Mount Hermon near its source, or the Tugela down the slopes of Mont-aux-Sources. Here we see the bubbling river of love as it meanders through the obstacles of life.

Love is like a heavenly stream which flows through a sinful world and through the hearts of sinners.

We follow the stream in its purling and rippling.

Paul now talks about love as if personifying it as a loving person. Love, however, always exists in man and is expressed in his deeds, so that Paul in that way wishes to rouse the Corinthians to study themselves and see whether they are being ruled by love.

By piling verb upon verb the excellence of love is stressed. The use of verbs also indicates the active working of love.

In this section we see that the "bond of perfection" (Colossians 3:14) has been woven in exquisite colours.

Paul first states *positively* what love is (*patient* and *kind*). Then he gives eight *negative* statements to indicate what love is *not*.

Positive: the first bubbling of the stream

1. Love is patient

The Greek word for patient means to be long-suffering, to endure evil done to us by others, without becoming wrathful.

It is striking that Paul begins with this, and at the end of this movement (verse 7) also closes with it: "... love's endurance ..." Where there is no love, there is also no endurance.

Every Christian needs to develop the virtue of patience or endurance, because a Christian must love, and love has patience. Love reins in temper and remains calm. It is slow to wrath.

When the wise Hillel spoke about the patience of love with his pupils, they asked him to clarify it in an image. Hillel then responded by saying that he compared long-suffering with the most precious things the earth can yield up: the jewels. They are compressed in the dark bowels of the earth for many years by the sand and the rock. Although they never see the sun, they shine with indestructible beauty once the light falls on them. They retain their shining quality even in the deepest night. Their quiet virtue is the greatest ornament of the world.

Let us look at *the* example, Christ. He never became impatient, even if at times it seemed as if things were deliberately aimed at making Him impatient.

And God: if He had not been endlessly patient, we would not exist any longer!

2. Love is kind

The Greek word here means to be friendly and compassionate. It does not mean only to endure the evil done to you by others, but also tries to alleviate the evil done by others. It is no pretence of friendliness: politeness should not be a mask but a lovely sign of love. Friendliness succours the neighbour. Unfriendly words are like spears which penetrate the flesh. In that way one can hurt but not make friends! Friendliness is one of the fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:22).

Negative: Four sets of statements

3. Not envious nor boastful

Here we have the second ripple of the stream.

- *When things go well with others: love is not envious*

Envy does not go with love. It does not grant another what it enjoys itself. It might congratulate another while secretly thinking that the other does not deserve the honour that has come to him. Love does not begrudge another anything, because it is love, and does not desire more than to be able to love and to give. For this one needs self-denial!

- *When it goes well with oneself: Love is not boastful*

To boast is alien to love. This Greek word, and also the word (conceited) which follows remind us of the Corinthians' sin of pride. In this the Corinthians did not act out of love.

Love does not *need* pomp and splendour. True love is great and need not boast. Somebody who really means something need not be seen in order to be someone. It is only somebody who does not mean anything who tries to be seen by everybody.

This need for ostentation is deeply rooted in our lives. One can even boast of one's humility - about the fact that one does not boast! False modesty is not humility. Those who truly love know true, deep humility.

This brings us to the third ripple in the stream of love as it meanders through the valley.

4. Not conceited ... not rude (In an older translation, "doth not behave itself unseemly")

- *Not conceited*

Love protects us from the sin of conceit (which had been *the* sin of the Corinthians). Pride is here described in terms of being puffed-up, and indicates how misshapen one can become through excessive pride. It makes one swell up and push others away. (The Greek word which is at stake here has been derived from the word for "bellows".)

The conceited man feels that he is really special, unusual. For him the main concern is to *shine* and not really to *excel*.

Love, however, has no need to be more than it is, and to be in the foreground. Love finds itself and its deeds nothing really special, but rather natural and obvious.

Love does not know that it is love!

The longer we listen to the ripples of the stream of love, the more beautiful they become.

- *Is not rude (or: "doth not behave itself unseemly")*

The Greek verb here means to act in an unseemly, improper fashion, be rude to somebody. It can also be translated as "love does not hurt anybody's feelings".

We should not only be concerned about being hurt ourselves, but should also worry about hurting others. Mostly it is true that each pinprick we receive is seen in terms of its being a dagger stab, while when we stick a dagger into somebody it is seen as a mere pinprick!

Love does not treat anybody rudely, even if it is treated as such itself.

Rudeness or impropriety is seen by Paul not merely as a lack of upbringing, but more deeply as a lack of love.

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves." (Romans 12:10 - New International Version). The other should be regarded as being more excellent than we ourselves. In spite of all the weaknesses that we might see in our neighbours, it should always and without condition be true of us that he is better than ourselves and the wrong which we see in him, is still not a hundredth of what we ourselves are guilty of.

"Leave no claim outstanding against you, except that of mutual love. He who loves his neighbour has satisfied every claim of the law" (Romans 13:8);

5. Never selfish ... nor quick to take offence

The stream goes bubbling on. No obstacle in its way can stop its progress through the sinful world!

- *Is not selfish*

The seeking of personal gain is a common human sin (cf. Philippians 2:21), but the essence of love is that it never seeks its own interest. Calvin says "We can see what true love is because by nature we only look after ourselves and seek our own advantage".

Love understands the art of forgetting itself, like a mother who keeps vigil day and night by the bedside of a child who is ill, without thinking of the sacrifice she is making for one moment.

In this world selfishness reigns supreme. The tragedy of life is that, while man seeks himself, he loses himself. Whoever wishes to retain his life, will lose it!

Selfishness has to be distinguished from love of the self, however. We have to love ourselves for Christian love does not concern only the love of the neighbour. Calvin says that Paul does not reject all care and concern for the self, but only the exaggeration of it to the exclusion of caring for the neighbour.

We should never, however, love that which is sinful in us. The extent to which we love ourselves (and also our neighbour) depends on our love of God. We should not measure our self-love against the love of the neighbour and vice versa.

- *Not quick to take offence*

The Greek word here means to be in a state of bitterness towards somebody else because of a real or imagined injury done to you.

The heart should never be filled with hatred and resentment. The Lord expressly warns us against revenge: "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. I will repay". The injustice done to you had in the first place been done to him, and He will avenge it.

"Love is quick to erase that which it has to endure, rather than noting it down in the account book" (Godet).

6. Love keeps no score of wrongs ... does not gloat over other men's sins

- *Keeps no score*

This ties in with the foregoing. Here there is an indication, however, of a deliberate calculation of evil, in other words, thinking how one can pay back somebody who has done one evil. (This does not mean, of course, that love cannot see what is wrong and simply reconcile itself with evil.)

It is strange that we so easily forgive our own sins but have such a hard time forgiving the sins of our fellow human beings. We have to blind ourselves to the many opportunities we have to pay others back for what they have done to us - "Never pay back evil for evil" (Romans 12:17).

Somebody who has done evil to us should not owe us something, but we should owe him something: forgiveness. It should be a greater joy to give forgiveness than to receive it. Perhaps pride stands in the way of this, because pride and forgiveness do not go hand in hand.

We should be like small children and accept each other as God has accepted us in Christ. God gives us all (peace, grace) but removes from us our guilt.

We do, after all, pray (in the Lord's prayer) that our sins should be forgiven *as we forgive others!*

As everything in this hymn of love, forgiveness must also emanate from love. If we disregard revenge because we consider it below ourselves, then we are still paying evil with evil because we are guilty of contempt. If we do not take revenge only because God does not want us to, we have only forced friendliness under which resentment still smoulders.

Only love brings us to the point where we *cannot* or *will not* repay evil with evil. Only the Holy Spirit can teach us to forgive - *and to forget.*

Not only should we not pay evil with evil, but we also have to do something positive - compassion has to be shown to those who do us evil.

Love of the enemy - he who has this, has the principle of true love!

- *Does not gloat over other men's sins, but delights in the truth*

Here there is a switch to the positive again, after all the negative things that have been said about what love is not .

Love is not negative, but positive.

Paul now says in what love finds its joy. Love rejoices *with* the truth and does not gloat *about* injustice. The rejoicing *with* presupposes a personification of the truth (just as love is represented as a person in verse 4). The idea can also be that truth is joy - in truth there is joy - and that love unites itself with the joy of truth.

Love does not rejoice in the *doing* of injustice, but in the *speaking* of truth. These two things constitute a clear contrast, because injustice is a lie.

Love is not simply neutral, it does not erase the border between truth and lie, good and evil. It chooses between the two. Love weeps and is sad about sin and injustice, and rejoices in the truth.

Positive: The last four traits

The eight negative descriptions of love (what it does *not do*) change over to the positive again in verse 6 - as it started to do already in verse 4.

The stream of love has now almost reached the sea, where we can still hear a last few quick ripples. In a few short sentences some virtues of love are mentioned.

The stress is strongly on the *all*. We already saw at the beginning that for Paul and his hymn of love there is a definite choice: either all (love) or nothing.

Love covers all, believes, hopes, endures - not simply a little, or up to a point - but *all*. Anything else would not be true love.

7. There is nothing love cannot face

The verb here can mean to "cover with silence" or to "endure".

In the first sense it means that we shall not talk about the sins of others. People in our time do take a special delight in talking about such things, also those things from which nothing can be learnt or which will never make anybody happier or better. With great passion the curtain is torn away to reveal the most personal facts!

Love does not take delight in unnecessarily making public the weaknesses and shame of people - as the newspapers do.

In the Book of Genesis 9:20-23 we read that Ham tells his brothers about his father's nakedness, but Shem and Japheth go to cover him.

At the Sea of Gennesareth Christ does not stress to Simon Peter how many times he had denied Him, but simply asks "Do you love Me?"

Do the same with evil as God in Christ did with our evil: Cover it up!

Love sees all but does not trumpet it forth to the world.

This does not mean that love simply covers up and passes by evil. Love is a friend of the truth and is also glad when injustice is revealed. Love does not exclude reprimand and just punishment.

Love also does not exclude holy hatred.

Love does not only hide the shame of others, but one's own shame as well. In this love is modest.

"For that reason a history of love could only be written in the hereafter" (Jonker).

8. No limit to its faith

Here we have to think of faith in the sense of *trust*. This trust emanates from love. When one truly loves someone, one trusts him fully and one has every hope of him, even though things might seem different.

Love does not suspect the neighbour.

It is, however, not only a matter of love between people. For those of us who love, believe in the love of God and have hope to gain everything from it. We have to have a firm trust in Him - especially when it *seems* that He has forsaken us.

Calvin says that everything does not therefore mean that love is so gullible as to simply believe anything!

The Son of Man was the only one on earth who never showed any mistrust - because his love was perfect.

Love is faith in the neighbour and in the power of God. It reaches out a hand to those who have fallen, for whom nobody holds out hope of redemption, to the criminal mistrusted and pushed apart by all, because ... love has faith.

9. No limit to its hope

Love is the mother of two daughters: mutual trust and good expectations of each other.

Love still hopes to achieve everything from him who sins - as the father does of the prodigal son, because he loved his son in spite of all. Once again the stress is on the absoluteness.

Love does not do this in a spirit of unfounded optimism. Our hope is no imagination.

Love knows no despair, for "never to despair is always to love" (Jonker).

He who loves can sing of spring in the midst of winter!

10. No limit to its endurance

This second phase in the song of praise about love begins by saying that love is long-suffering, perhaps also to be translated as "persevering". Love never gives up.

The stream of love has meandered on, never stopping for an obstacle, never dried up by the sins of the world. Love perseveres in spite of opposition and remains steadfast and true, immovable, always overflowing in beneficence and work of the Lord. Love does not allow itself to be deviated from the way taken, does not hesitate in the face of adversity, never flees.

A person who loves is not a weakling but is made of granite. Love is an armour which makes one invincible.

Love is mightier than anything we know, mightier than the most modern nuclear weapons, because weapons can only destroy.

"Love is as strong as death, the vigour of love is hard as the empire of death, its glow is a fire, the flame of the Lord" - in these terms love is hymned in the Old Testament Song of Songs.

A flame of the Lord. The flame which the apostle Paul is lauding here is also a flame lit by the Lord Himself.

Christ is the only One who could love fully, completely up to the end.

Even on the Cross it is as if everything conspires to make Him stop loving us, but his love (and not the nails) keeps him securely tied to the Cross.

We live by the precious and undeserved love of God. Therefore we have to live in love. We also have to love with the same love He showed us.

For that reason the apostle says, in the third part of the hymn to love, to which we turn now: Love is permanent, it lasts for ever. It is an essential part of love that it should never, never, cease.

Chapter 8

THE IMMORTALITY OF LOVE

(1 Corinthians 13:8-13)

We now find ourselves at the river mouth, and from our vantage point on the beach we have a glimpse of eternal life.

From verse 4 to 7 Paul did not talk about the *charismata* any longer. It seems, however, that he has not lost sight of the aim of his argument, because verse 8 brings us back to the special gifts. Verses 4 to 7 also do not represent a deviation in his argument, but rather an extension in order to let us see more fully why love exceeds the special gifts.

It is love only which can make one a true human being living for the greater honour of God and benefit of his neighbour.

The contrast is here between that which passes, which is limited to this life, and that which exists in all eternity. Love never dies (verse 8a). This is the best proof that it is the most important (verse 13b). The things which the Corinthians had regarded as the most important are proved to be transient.

The transient is worthless without the permanent. Love touches the core, like being the steel reinforcement inside the walls of the building, and not the scaffolding outside which has to be removed.

We first note those things which come to an end (verses 8-12) and then the three which are permanent (verse 13).

Many will disappear

Once the Perfect has come, many things of this dispensation which had been partial will disappear. Paul wants to warn the Corinthians not to regard as peripheral that which is most important (love) and to elevate the peripheral (the gifts of the spirit) to the position of being most important. Three of the highest gifts are mentioned, and their transitory nature indicated:

1 Prophetic gifts will cease

The original verb used here literally means powerless or unable to work. The prophetic gifts need not be there any longer, because they will no longer have any work.

We do not have a need for prophets any more in the sense of the Old Testament, because we have the Word. This too will not be needed any more at the end, when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.

2 The tongues of ecstasy will cease ...

The verb here makes it clear that they will cease in opposition to the immortality of love, because the tongues of ecstasy in many churches have gone to make place for the preaching of the Word in the languages of all nations and peoples.

3 Knowledge is partial

The same word is used here in the Greek version as in the case of the prophecies. It will not work any more, will not have a purpose any longer. This does not mean that knowledge will not be needed any longer. It indicates the nature of knowledge which we have - knowledge which can only be partial. We cannot fully understand the ways of the Lord. There are many riddles for us, for example when it comes to suffering, illness and death.

All these three special gifts will disappear.

The cause of mortality/transitoriness

"... for our knowledge and our prophecy alike are partial, and the partial vanishes when wholeness comes."

Verses 9 and 10 offer the reason why the prophecies, tongues and knowledge will become obsolete. They are deficient, partial. Once the perfect has arrived, they are not of any more use.

It is hard to say in what the imperfection consists. Grosheide does not wish to link this to sin, and yet I feel that that might well be a reason. He mentions as reason the nature of the dispensation we are living in. The kingdom of God has not fully come. Paul thus does not seem to mean that we only know a part of what can be known, but that knowledge *as such* is incomplete and transitory in terms of the nature of this dispensation, and for that reason this will change as soon as the Perfect has arrived.

If the sun rises, the feeble light of the moon is eclipsed and the stars are not needed any longer. The appearance of the Perfect causes the disappearance of that which is partial.

The time aspect of the verb here indicates a definite and fixed moment which is expected: the advent of Christ when his kingdom will finally come. The world does not stand still but moves towards a specific end, a climax which will close this dispensation finally.

We need all the time we have to prepare us for the advent of perfection: we have to love. Whoever does not love now but concentrates on transitory things, will not be at home in the perfect dispensation, when all these things will have disappeared and only love will remain.

As a child compared to a man

"When I was a child, my speech, my outlook, and my thoughts were all childish. When I grew up, I had finished with childish things."

The apostle now appears personally again in verse 11 and explains everything in terms of an image. As a child (the Greek means a small child) he spoke, thought and reasoned. But now that he has become a man, he has let go of the things of childhood.

The image indicates a normal development: the child wishes to become a man, and the man does not want to be a child again. In this way the ages also culminate in perfection. Paul does not say this explicitly, but it is not necessary either. Just as a man relinquishes that which is childish when he has become adult, so the gifts which belong to this dispensation will not be necessary in future any longer.

A puzzling image in a distorted mirror

"Now we see puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face" (verse 12a).

The second Greek word in this verse is "because", which does not relate to the image used in verse 11, but relates rather to what the apostle said in verses 8-10 in regard to the transitoriness of the things which are partial. Verse 11 offered a comparison, but the first part of verse 12 expresses the issue stated in verses 8-10 in an image.

"See" or "look" is an indication of the Christian's whole doing, speaking and thinking. Paul possibly chose the concept "see" because he could link it with the image of the mirror.

The contrast is drawn between "now" and "one day". The exegetes of these words have had great difficulty. Because there is mention in the old translation of looking "through" a mirror, some even thought of the window panes that were used then, and which were made of half-transparent glass or horn. The Greek "through", however, does not only mean "right through" but also "by means of". The expression "darkly" (old translation) or "puzzling" (NEB) shows the *modus quo*: we see things "in the shape of", "in a riddle".

The best solution here is to think of the metal mirrors of those years, which in comparison with our silvered mirrors gave a very vague image. (Our mirrors do not give a pure image either, because the image is inverted.) One who could see only by means of such a mirror could not even approximately see something as it truly was. He had to ask himself what he was really seeing - for him it was a riddle, incomprehensible.

The meaning can therefore be described in the following way: "Now we are looking into a dim mirror and we see a puzzling image".

Our seeing is therefore doubly obscured: we do not see things straight, but only by means of their reflection in a mirror, and then the image offered by the mirror is still unclear.

When perfection has arrived, then it will not be the case any more.

Then we see face to face, so that things are faced squarely, and not only by means of a mirror. Then we will see things as they really are.

To see and to know God

Up to now we have spoken in general of seeing "things". Although "seeing" does not have an object, it emerges clearly from the subsequent material that Paul is here thinking of the knowledge of God. The expression "face to face" indicates this, and is strongly reminiscent of Exodus 33:11 and Deuteronomy 34:10.

Calvin also notes this when he says that Paul is here comparing the preaching of the Word with a mirror. God, who cannot be seen, has used his Word as a mirror to make Himself known to people. (The same is true of God's revelation in nature: the creatures reflect God's invisible majesty.) We do not see Him directly but by means of a mirror, his Word. (To use a more modern image: we only have a photograph of God but have not seen God Himself.)

Calvin warns that we should not derive from this that what is said in the Word is unclear, doubtful or wrong. The intention is simply that things are not as clear yet as they will be on the last day. Compare what has already been said about the prophecies: they will cease. The Word will also cease to be, because then it will not be needed any longer to reflect the words of God to us. (If I am far away from a beloved one, then his photograph consoles me. When I am with him, his photograph is not worth anything any longer!)

Deficient and perfect knowledge

"My knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me" (verse 12b).

After Paul has explained the first part of this verse in the contrast between the "now" and "one day" by means of an image, he expresses this same contrast in this part of the verse, but without imagery. He also does not deal any more with the prophecies and glossolalia, but with knowledge alone, because in that way he can indicate very clearly what things will be like in the perfect dispensation.

Our knowledge of the present is derived with great trouble, but knowledge hereafter will be immediate and penetrating, and not a puzzling image in a dim mirror any longer. We shall see things as they really are.

What that will be like is expressed by Paul in the way in which man is known by God, viz. in the absolute sense, "like God's knowledge of me". Our knowledge (of God) is thus compared with God's knowledge (of us). There is no question here of equality between God and men.

We have now seen that a lot will be left behind once the perfect has arrived. The logical question now is, what will endure or last?

Three things remain

The apostle answers this question with the following:

"In a word, there are three things that last for ever: faith, hope and love" (verse 13a).

This is the conclusion that he arrives at. Calvin says that it gives the impression of a sum in subtraction that has been done. After all that is unimportant has been subtracted, only that which is important remains.

It is to be understood that love remains, because in verse 8 it has already been said that it will never cease. A great deal has been speculated about faith and hope also being able to survive (because this could clash with other statements in Scripture, for example 1 Corinthians 5:7 and Romans 8:24b). In verse 7 faith and hope are already linked to love. And something which is linked to another immortal quality would be similarly immortal.

Faith remains

Faith is used here in the general, wide sense of trust/fidelity (cf. 13:7) and not in the sense of belief (cf. 12:9). Faith is a human quality, however. Each person believes. The pagans also believe. It is thus not a result of the Fall, being something which had to be returned to man again afterwards (as a *donum superadditum*). This trust (faith) can as a result of sin however be directed upon God or upon idols, so that there can be apostatic faith.

In the hereafter man will be complete again, and therefore he will still believe, and his relationship with God will still exist.

Hope remains

The same is true of hope. Hope also belongs to our being as people and will remain. It is situated close to faith, because it also affects all people. Hope is not uncertainty (cf. verse 7 and Hebrews 6:19; 1 Peter 1:13). We do not simply hope that it will be thus because we doubt, but precisely because we are so certain. Hope drives out uncertainty!

In Romans 8:24b something is said of hope that makes clear its difference from faith: "Now to see is no longer to hope: why should a man endure and wait for what he already sees?"

As faith indicates that the relationship between God and ourselves is a relationship of *trust* in the *present*, so hope speaks of the same relationship of fixed trust and certainty in the *future*.

There is an intimate link between faith and hope. In Hebrews 11:1 it is said, for example, that "Faith gives substance to our hopes, and makes us certain of realities we do not see".

Here we see how closely related faith and hope are. Both faith and hope are absolute certainties. They make man immovable as a rock in a stormy sea, because it means to relinquish all from one's own hands and to retain nothing of the self but to expect all of Him.

Love remains

These three remain.

We have followed the sustained stream of love from its origin up to here, where it flows into the sea in a delta of three streams. Many obstacles along the way have been overcome. Lovely plants (gifts of God) which grew along the banks have been left behind to wither away. Now the stream flows into the sea and is able for ever to dwell in the presence of God, Who is Love.

The greatest of them all

Two of the three streams of the delta, however, are only tributaries of the mighty mainstream of love, which is the middle stream. "The greatest of these is love" (verse 13b).

The two Greek words can be translated as "the most/the greatest of these", or with "more than that". The first translation is preferred.

Why does Paul set love not only above all the other spiritual gifts (because they cease) but also above faith and hope, which, together with love, will remain? Calvin says: because love remains for all eternity. What he means with that is not too clear, because the apostle does say that faith and hope remain with love.

Others say again that love is the most because in faith and hope each person can find value only for himself, but love always keeps on moving away from the individual and towards his neighbours, giving them the advantage.

There is truth in this. It is true that people understand the language of love more easily. In our deeds of love we can engrave our names indelibly on the hearts of others.

It is told that when Livingstone, the great missionary and explorer, died in the hinterland of Africa, the fifty-six Africans who had crossed the continent with him took out his heart and buried it under a tree. They carried his body back to the coast, from where it was later returned to Europe for burial. In that way they wanted to say: Europe can have his body, but his heart belongs in Africa, because he loved Africa. Livingstone had spoken the language of love, which they understood.

Our world, in which deep, cold abysses yawn, needs warmth. On our walls, doors and windows people have to be able to read: "I was a stranger and you took me in"; on our cupboards, "I was naked and you clothed me" (Matthew 25:35, 36); on our laden tables: "Invite the poor, the blind and the crippled" (Luke 14:13).

And yet this is not the reason why love is the most important. Because even though the world might understand the language of love better, our

faith and hope do not have meaning for ourselves only. And in our love we are not only concerned with others, because (as we have seen already) there is also the matter of love of the self.

Why then is love the most important of all?

It is the most important because it is *fundamental*. It is not only involved in a specific relationship or area of life, but it *permeates* them all. It gives *direction* to our life.

It gives *colour* to all we do (also the faith and the hope). For that reason Goethe compared a heart without love to a magic lantern without light. (If a lamp is placed in such a magic lantern, all sorts of lovely colours and shapes appear in its glass.) When the light of God's love burns in our hearts, our lives gain colour and it becomes a joy.

Even if it is true that this light does not always burn so clearly on earth, we do know that it will burn until all eternity.

More than faith and hope

Love is more than faith, because faith is a dead faith if it does not work through love; if it is not a faith which is uttered through *deeds* of love.

Love is more than hope, because hope is nothing more than a selfish desire when it does not emanate from a heart suffused with love of God.

Faith and hope without love are corrupted.

*Faith is the *empty hand*, which God fills with the love of and to God and love of the neighbour. The empty hand is important, but the gift of love is more. Hope is the *desiring heart*, which opens itself unto God's love, and which expects all of his love. The desiring heart is important, but the fulfilment through love is more.

The beast of burden of faith and hope is essential, but the treasure of God's love, the precious gift carried by the beast of burden, is more* (Overduin).

Love is the most important because it is the fulfilment of the law. It is the heart of the commandments of God (cf. Matthew 22:34-40). For that reason

Calvin says: "The commandment of love is a very short commandment and a very long one. It is only one and yet many. It is the basis of all the commandments".

On Charles Kingsley's gravestone the following inscription appears: *God is love* - the brief resumé of his confession. Under that is engraved: *amavimus, amamus, amabimus* (we loved, we love, we shall love) - the brief resumé of the history of his life. His confession and his life were one: No love without Him who is Love!

In my life too each day should be a hymn: "I love"; and the end of my life a hymn: "I loved", and after my life the song of joy: "I shall love (unto eternity)".

FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Chapter 9

THE GOSPEL OF CHRISTMAS IN NAMES

(Luke 1:5-25, 57-66)

Many people in the story of Christmas sing of joy: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, the angels, the shepherds. How else can it be, because even at an ordinary birthday many people sing. These songs of praise are so rich in meaning that one could create a number of Christmas sermons about each of them.

Often we do not realize that there is also a song hidden in the names of people involved in the story of Christmas. Freely translated *Simeon* means "answer to prayer", *Anna* means "grace" and *Joseph* means "God multiplies".

Let us this Christmas listen to the song in the names of one family: that of Zechariah, Elizabeth and John.

No child ...

In order to fully understand the song in the names of these people one has to try to enter into their situation. The tragedy of it emerges in Luke 1:7: for they had no child and no prospect of a child, because both had become old. Only childless parents will be able to fully understand this sorrow.

For many days Zechariah must have thought that the Lord had forgotten him. And Elizabeth might have wondered what had become of the fidelity of the Lord - because He gives us children. And why should she not have received a child?

If we are going through the depths of despair, the same ideas often enter our minds. Difficult circumstances this past year might also have led you to think that the Lord had forgotten you.

Miracle in the temple

On this specific day everything in their lives changed radically. It was such incredible news that Zechariah could not believe it. He asked for a sign (verse 18).

He is then reminded that it is an angel of the Lord addressing him; "I am Gabriel". And merely by mentioning his name he silences Zechariah because Gabriel means "God is powerful". Even though Elizabeth had remained barren and the time had long passed that they could have a child, nothing is impossible for the powerful God. He creates life, even from death.

Zechariah is stricken with dumbness as punishment for his lack of faith. (Whoever will not believe, also will not sing!) But his name still carries a hymn of praise, because Zachariah means "the Lord has thought of us".

Even though Zechariah thought that the Lord had forgotten him, and might have been thinking that his name was a mere mockery, this was never the case. We as people often forget each other, and so cause great misery, but God never forgets, even though we often forget Him. In all the years that had passed He had not forgotten this God-fearing couple (cf. verse 6), and you and I have not been out of his thoughts all this time, either.

Elizabeth's hymn of praise

By this I do not mean the well-known (Luke 1:41-45) which she declaimed when Mary greeted her. We are here thinking simply of her name, which means "God is faithful".

Fidelity has become a scarce commodity among friends and married people. Often one is scarcely married (with fidelity promised) before the truth is broken and people are divorced. People have so little real fidelity.

God, however, does know something like this. He is true to his Word. He keeps to what He has promised. He promised so many thousands of years ago to send the Messiah that many of the contemporaries of Elizabeth must have begun to think that it would not happen any longer. (Just as so many people today believe that Christ will not come again).

It might also happen to us that we call upon God's promises and his fidelity without it seeming as if He will listen to our prayers.

Elizabeth's name warns us that this is not true, for the Lord is faithful.

His name is John

John did not simply get this name because his parents liked the sound of it. It also was not without meaning as many of our Western names are nowadays. No, it happened directly in line with the command of God's angel Gabriel (verse 13).

After nine months a gray-haired woman in great wonderment holds a baby boy in her arms. His father looks on with joy. He cannot, however, sing the praises of the Lord to give expression to the joy in his heart.

The story in verse 57-66 is touching. It makes one think of an old family photograph: a seated Elizabeth who looks at the baby in great tenderness, with, standing beside her, Zechariah, filled with paternal pride.

The ceremony of circumcision on the eight day, with a speechless father, creates an uncomfortable situation. The well-meaning neighbours and family decided on behalf of Zechariah what the name of the child shall be - what father in his situation would not have done the same?

Zechariah, however, must already have indicated to Elizabeth earlier on what had happened in the temple, so that she refuses and says that his name shall be John, even though there is nobody in the family who bears that name. Zechariah confirms this by writing it down.

Everybody is surprised, and even more surprised when Zechariah regains the power of speech immediately. The first thing that he does is to do what he had been unable to do for nine months, and that is to praise the Lord aloud for the blessing bestowed upon him.

The people in the whole mountainous region of Judea heard of these wonderful events, and wondered what would become of this child in the future. Zechariah already knew, however. The angel had already told him that he would prepare the nation for the coming of the Messiah. He was,

as his name indicated, a gift, a blessing from God, and belonged not only to his parents but to the whole nation.

God with us

People are harsh, cruel and without mercy, and wish to take revenge. God does not take revenge. He grants us mercy again and again. Directly after John He sends us his only Son, Immanuel (God with us - Matthew 1:23).

God is therefore not only *for* us (thoughtful, true and merciful). He is also *with* us. How wonderful! Because if you love someone, you do not only want to know that He is thinking of you. You also want Him with you, especially if you are lonely and alone.

With his Holy Spirit Christ at Pentecost even came to live *in* us.

One day, with his second advent, the second Christmas will come. There will be one great difference, though. Whereas at his first advent He came as a small child, at the second He will come as the Judge of Heaven and Earth. Those who do not love Him should *fear* the day. Those who love Him *long* for the day. Because on the New Earth He will be so near to us that He can wipe the tears from our eyes Himself.

Christmas quintet

From the five names on which the Christmas story centres, we can see that Christmas is a quintet:

On this day we sing because:

- * The Lord thinks of us
- * The Lord is faithful
- * The Lord is mighty
- * The Lord is merciful
- * The Lord is with us.

How rich the Christmas gospel - even in the smallest detail, the meaning of names.

A blessed Christmas to you all!

Chapter 10

GOD'S PENULTIMATE VISIT

(Acts 2)

It is early morning in Jerusalem. Usually the city is wide awake and alive at this time of the morning. The sandal-maker would already be seated in front of his shop at his last, with his mouth full of nails. The potters would already be setting out their wares - jars, jugs and pitchers. The basket-weaver would also have his wares ready for sale. The smith would be stoking the fire, and the carpenter begin hammering. One after the other the shops would open: the butcher, the fishmonger, the tailor, the jeweller, the vintner.

Today, however, is a holiday - the day of the Pentecost. Later during the day the city will change into a hive of activity, and the narrow streets will barely be able to carry all the traffic.

Waiting

In a house near the temple about 120 people have already begun gathering early on.

They are praying.

And waiting.

It is already the tenth day since Jesus's ascension that they have gathered in the same building. Just before He was taken away on a cloud, Jesus had promised them that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit would come over them, so that they would become his witnesses to the very ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). They feel so powerless to give expression to the tremendous command of Jesus (cf. Matthew 28:18-20). How will they be able to learn all the dialects of the nations to whom they have to preach the gospel? Would the other nations ever listen to them? Would they not rather be killed?

The previous Sabbath they had really felt like orphans, for Jesus had gone back to heaven, and his Spirit had not yet come to console them.

It is as if their prayers for fulfilment through the Spirit are more urgent, more heartfelt this morning.

Would He not perhaps have waited for Pentecost to fulfil his promise?

A feast of fulfilment

Pentecost (feast of the firstlings, or feast of the weeks) was the second of the three great annual feasts. Easter fell with the beginning of the annual barley harvest. Pentecost was the feast at the end of the wheat harvest. It was celebrated exactly fifty days after the sickle had first been put to the ripe corn. It was therefore a harvest festival, a feast of fulfilment, of the closing of the entire wheat harvest, a day of great gratitude for the blessing of the Lord.

Would Jesus perhaps also choose this day to finish off his work, to fulfil it through giving his Spirit? Or had He forgotten them?

The city has woken. The streets begin to teem with life. Apart from the Jerusalemites and Israelites from surrounding villages there are thousands of pilgrims from all the corners of the civilized world who have travelled to the city specially for this feast. Everybody is on the way to the temple, where the thanksgiving sacrifices will be brought. Many of them pass the house where the ardent prayers are rising up.

Powerful signs

Then suddenly something very unusual happens. There is a sound as of a powerful wind, like a hurricane, a storm. It fills the whole room, and yet the walls and the roof are not blown down. Nobody has yet experienced anything like it.

The group has just recovered from the shock when something more puzzling happens. This time they do not hear anything, they see something - fire, which is yet not fire because nothing burns - not their hair either when the fire divides and comes down on them.

Unmistakeably clear

After some of them had recovered from their shock, they knew: It was the coming of the Holy Spirit. Spirit, after all, in the original Hebrew, meant wind. God came to Adam in the evening breeze (Genesis 3:8). And in the same way He made Himself known to David in the rushing sound of the treetops (2 Samuel 5:24). He also came to Elijah in the same way (1 Kings 19:12b). Had the Lord Jesus not blown on his disciples and said: Receive my Spirit? And John the Baptist had said that the One coming after him would baptize in tongues of fire.

Fire and wind. Both signs of strength. What can stand in the path of a storm wind? And what can stand against fire?

But it is striking that this time the Lord does not come in a soft breeze, but in a sound as of a raging storm. In contrast to the case of Elijah (1 Kings 5:12a) He comes in the guise of fire this time.

Cleansing needed

Is this not perhaps a sign from the Lord that He wishes to make clear to them that, before his Spirit can enter into them, there should first be thorough spiritual house-cleaning? Is the wind not a symbol of dust and mustiness having to be blown away? And is the fire not a clear sign that, what the wind could not blow away, had to be cleansed further? Are there not perhaps hard hearts which first have to be melted down, purified before the Holy Spirit can live in them?

It is wonderful to see how the Spirit works: It renews without destroying. It is wind that cleanses, but does not blow down, it is fire which burns clean, but does not burn out.

Without exception

The 120 had not yet recovered from their surprise when the third miracle happened: everybody was filled with the Holy Spirit. Not as in the old dispensation when only some received the Spirit. *All of them*. There was no doubt about this. They felt it, they knew - as certainly as they heard the wind and saw the flames. They were fulfilled, completely.

Jesus then used the feast of the harvest to complete his own work. Like the wheat He too had been sown, He had to die and be buried. But like the wheat kernel He too rose and brought forth a rich harvest. How wonderfully is the symbolic prophetic language of the Old Testament fulfilled.

The climax of God's work

The people are overjoyed, for Jesus has kept his promise. God has visited them - for the third time. At creation God came the first time, with the birth of Christ the second time and now for the third time the Spirit comes to perfect all. Christ had promised that this Spirit would never leave again, and now He has come to stay.

And how intimately everybody feels his presence:

God *with* us in creation.

God *for* us at Christ's nativity.

But God *in* us at Pentecost.

Tongues released

Then, suddenly, something strange happens. They begin to talk. They are so full of the Spirit that it spills over. But the most remarkable thing is that they do not speak Aramaic. Practically everybody is speaking a different language, a language which he had not known before: Persian, Median, Elamitic, Mesopotamian, Judaic, Cappadocian, Egyptian, Libyan, Latin, Arabic and many more - a true confusion of Babel.

No, it is not really a Babel-like cacophony. At Babel the Lord had let the nations split asunder (Genesis 11). Here there is talk about the great deeds of the Lord so that everybody can hear about his deeds in different languages, so that everybody can hear the one message. It is thus nothing other than God's reply to their great problem: how to take the message to all the nations and languages.

The remarkable thing is also that they *want* to do this. They are not shy any longer, because they are more convinced than ever that Jesus Christ is the only Redeemer of the whole world.

What happens inside the house does not pass unnoticed in the street. First there is the noise of the storm, which puzzles people. Yet it is not a storm. And when some of them out of curiosity wander into the house, strange tongues of fire are dancing over people's heads. Then follows the enthusiastic talking in tongues and when they come nearer, they are more incredulous than ever.

"But Peter is talking my own language!"

"How could John have learnt to speak my language? He is a simple Galilean, after all!"

Surprised and incredulous - to put it mildly. What is going on here? What can all this mean?

Something out of the ordinary has definitely happened here.

A simple explanation

Some of the bystanders have a quick and simple explanation. "Can't you see that these people are drunk?" At such a harvest festival the wine did tend to flow freely, and perhaps these Jews have simply started a little early

...

As always there are the mockers. Peter, however, explains that respectable people do not begin drinking at nine in the morning - what has happened is the long-awaited granting of the Holy Spirit, the fulfilment of the prophecies (Joel 2:28-32). What they hear from the 120 is not the work of the wine deity Bacchus, but the work of the Holy Spirit.

A question and an answer

Upon hearing Peter's sermon many are deeply affected, and instead of mocking they ask: "What must we do?"

They can do something: "Convert, and be baptized. Then you too will receive the Holy Spirit as a gift."

The result? Something incredible. One of the greatest baptismal ceremonies in the history of the world took place in Jerusalem that day: Three thousand!

And us?

What must we do? What must you and I, people of the twentieth century, do? The answer to this question is still the same after two thousand years: conversion and baptism.

But, you will say, you are converted. You were baptized as a child. And at Pentecost you too received the Holy Spirit.

Quite correct.

But there is still something like daily conversion. And we have the command daily to pray for the granting of the Holy Spirit. God only grants his Spirit to those who pray for it without ceasing.

The hardest but the greatest

Pentecost remains a difficult feast. On Christmas Day there is the child in the manger. At Easter a Man rises from the grave. At Pentecost there is only the sound of wind and flames, people who speak in strange languages and an apostle who preaches. And yet Pentecost is our greatest festival. On this day Christ completes the work which He started at his nativity. On this day his kingdom breaks open a path in the hearts of three thousand converts.

And the inversion is like day by night. Hesitant disciples become fearless apostles. Even though they are threatened by death they prefer to obey God rather than men. The gospel spreads like a veld fire. The Acts of the apostles appear before our eyes - more precisely, the Act of the Spirit in the apostles.

He will come again

Pentecost is indeed the turning point in the history of the world. With his third visit to the world God's work attains a climax. It is not his final visit to the earth, however, only the penultimate one.

As Christ was taken away on the clouds, He will return (Acts 1:11). God's fourth advent however will not be to save but to judge. The world will not be baptized by fire, but destroyed by fire.

Only those who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit will escape the wrath of the fourth coming. For us, waiting upon his final coming, this third coming therefore is of essential interest.

Serious self-investigation

What do we do with the Holy Spirit? Do we also mock?

One need not only mock openly. One can also, academically and intellectually, even by quoting Scripture, mock by denying the work of the Holy Spirit. You can talk with a slighting smile of the Pentecostalist sects. But in the meantime you are dead inside.

There is the possibility - a frightening one - that one can know the whole of the Bible and the Confessional Creeds and not know the Holy Spirit, and in so doing grieve the Spirit by denying it.

Only those who are serious about God's penultimate coming to the world can also look forward with ardent longing to his final coming!

Chapter 11

LIBERATED LIBERATORS

(Matthew 2:13-23)

At the beginning of the new year everybody thinks of what is going to be *done*. Usually we prefer not to think about what is going to *happen* to us, especially in these days of stormy history at the southern tip of Africa. Yet what happens to us (passive) is just as essential an element of our lives as the more active aspect of doing.

This was also the case in the life of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. From our activist attitude in the Western culture we usually just look at what He did and taught, and we forget the message of what *happened* to Him. What happened to Him, what He underwent, however, also hold a message for us in the new year.

The section that we want to consider is Matthew 2:13-23: the flight to Egypt, the infanticide in Bethlehem and the return to Nazareth.

A cowardly brute

The murderer Herod - among his many victims could be counted his own sons - is afraid. The astrologers did not obey his request to return to Jerusalem to tell him of where they had found the new King. A frightened person is a dangerous one. Herod decides that even a mass murder, and especially a murder of children, is not too excessive if one wants to make sure that a possible claimant to his throne is eliminated. Many will have to die to make sure that *one* is caught. (As One later died to save many.)

The message that Joseph receives in a dream from the angel is: Flee, to Egypt, tonight!

Egypt - not really the place that any Israelite goes to lightly. He would rather flee from it, for can any Jew ever forget the history of the enslavement?

What a humiliation for the Prince - to become a refugee on the way to Egypt. Who among us can know what it is like to be a refugee? Or what it means to be in a strange country among strangers, without any true rights and privileges? Yet today there are so many millions of refugee Christians throughout the world.

The first martyrs

Try to envisage this. A Jewish mother and father are woken up by somebody battering at the door. Soldiers. "How many children do you have? Show us!" In the room the soldiers inspect the sleeping children - and then jerk the youngest boy who, according to them cannot be older than two, from his bedding. Outside they cold-bloodedly cut off his head - as one would kill a chicken. "Orders from the king", they explain to the parents, and with this explanation the weeping parents and brothers and sisters have to be satisfied. Herod's soldiers have already moved on to the neighbours...

One can hardly imagine the weeping on a day like this. As Rachel (whose grave is nearby in Ramah) grieved in the days of Jeremiah about her children (the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin) killed by the cruel Assyrians, she has now become inconsolable.

How can God allow such senseless cruelty?

It is not Stephen, but these innocent children who are the first martyrs for Christ. They die in his place. He came precisely to save these children through his blood, and now they are saving Him.

These unknown, unknowing young martyrs therefore do not die senselessly and meaninglessly - the blood of no martyr is ever spilt needlessly. They die unknowing, so that He can live, and later, fully aware of what He is doing, He will sacrifice his blood for them.

Liberated from Egypt

Shortly after this last atrocity committed by Herod, God calls him to account for his deeds. In Egypt the angel commands Joseph to return to his

fatherland. Together with Mary and the Child he undertakes the journey home.

But why did Christ go to Egypt? Hosea (11:1) "I called my son out of Egypt" prophesized this, for the Saviour had to be liberated. He had to become like man in all things, and (obversely) everything that happened to Him had to happen to his people and to us too. Through Him Israel could centuries before say farewell to slavery, and what is more, it is once Egypt lies behind Him that Israel is truly liberated.

This is not the end, however. Joseph discovers that Archelaos is reigning in Judah in the place of his father Herod. His father had taught him well, because he had already bloodily suppressed an uprising against him.

Then rather to the province of Galilee, where the more humane Herod Antipas (another son of the old Herod) had assumed power. Thus they went to live in Nazareth, as had been foretold by prophets for many centuries.

We hear only once more of the Child Jesus when as a twelve-year old He goes with his parents to Jerusalem. After that Scripture is silent until He begins his mature ministry at the age of about thirty. But during his adult life too there are many things which will happen to Him in accordance with the will of God. The Cross is already waiting on Golgotha!

Living from redemption

Whatever we plan on doing, and whatever the Lord allows to happen to us in the new year, the most important that can and must happen to us is that we should be liberated by the liberated Saviour - each day, each week, each month, the whole year.

The times in which we are living are not less dangerous than during the rule of the Herods. What can happen to us? But even though the new year should bring us disappointment, tears and grief, we can live through his redemption.

As Christ, the Redeemer, first had to be freed from Egypt, we cannot lead others to true freedom unless we first become free ourselves. (Many so-called liberation theologies and ideologies do not know this fundamental truth about the gospel.) Let all of us therefore write down the following motto at the top of our agenda of what has to happen to us during this new year:

Liberated liberators!

AT FUNERALS

Chapter 12

A MEETING BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

(Luke 7:11-17)

Nain means beautiful and joyous. And rightly so, because it is a picturesque little town against the green slopes of Hermon.

Today, however, the name *Mara* (grief) would be more suitable, though. The strong iron gates of the town could not prevent death from entering, and this morning a body is carried to the grave through the same gates.

A great tragedy

Is it one of the old people of Nain who has finally died? If this were the case, then the procession moving to the grave would not be such a heart-broken one. No, it is a young man, in the full flowering of his young life, who has been wrapped in the cloths of the grave. The once strong Zechariah is being borne to the grave. His face is uncovered, but he cannot see the blue sky, the white houses against the hill, the green grass, the bright sunlight. He also (perhaps fortunately) does not hear the keening of the women ... Like anyone who has died before him there is no place left for him in the town among the people - he is being removed, albeit with great respect and reverence. He is being removed from the place of life to the lonely little plot where children do not play, where old people do not like to come.

It is not only the mother, Anna, who is following the procession in a state of stunned disbelief. Now and then, as the finality of it all strikes her, she sobs. The whole town is affected by this death. Zechariah was the only child - of a widow. Who will now look after her?

"Do not cry any more, Anna. You have no tears left" - these might be the words of a friend who supports her, and who means so well. But how often has she not heard these words in the last twelve hours? (How powerless one does feel in trying to console someone who has lost everything.) Zechariah was all she had, and how had she not loved her child.

Life meeting death

The procession is so preoccupied with its grief that it does not notice another procession coming from the opposite direction. When one does look up, he sees a whole crowd of people near them. What on earth can they be doing in Nain, which is a quiet, tranquil little town. Even the keening women stop their grieving for a moment when it becomes clear that the approaching group will not stand respectfully aside. Could this be a band of robbers plying their trade in broad daylight? It is clear that it is not a Roman patrol. What kind of Jews can this be, who do not stand aside for death, who have no respect?

Little do the funeral-goers know what is happening: Life is meeting death. And Life does not stand aside for death - what is more, it will vanquish it.

After the procession has come to a standstill, a Man walks towards them and stops next to the heart-broken Anna. When He puts his hand on her shoulder and looks into her pale, grief-stricken face, she is overcome by grief again, and passionate sobs tear at her.

"Do not weep." How often has she not heard these words? Is there nobody who would rather say to her: "I understand your inconsolable grief, do weep until you cannot go on". And yet - this time it is different. There is inexplicable force in the calm, tranquil Stranger's words. Suddenly she feels calm and consoled.

"Do not weep," - because it does not suit the occasion. You need not watch your only beloved being put away in a grave for ever.

When the bearers resume their movement, because they think that the Stranger has already expressed his condolences, He walks to them. They stop in confusion. He touches the bier - and to everybody's surprise He begins to talk to the dead man. Does He not know that bodies are dead, that no human voice can penetrate to them?

They are right. But they did not know that God is in their midst, and his voice does penetrate to the dead.

A funeral cancelled!

"Young man, I tell you, rise".

The next moment something totally incredible happens: Zechariah slowly rises from the bier. The bearers are shocked out of their minds, and the bier drops from their hands.

Zechariah tries to rise with his limbs wrapped in the cerements, and he wipes his eyes. "What are you doing here? What have you done to me? Untie me, please."

Anna too stands as if nailed to the ground. When she hears her son's voice, however, she cries out in wonderment and joy: "My son, my son, Zechariah" and she embraces him warmly.

The most remarkable thing that has happened in history has happened here: a funeral procession has been brought to a halt. Instead of moving to the grave it reverses and returns to Nain. Instead of funeral dirges, songs of joy reverberate against the slopes of mount Hermon. An empty grave lies behind them.

The crowd has acknowledged that only Somebody sent by God could do such a miracle. The feasting Nainites look with unbelief at the strong Zechariah, who has become part of them again.

Nain can retain its name: It is a place of joy, of cheer ... the unknown village is soon discussed everywhere because of the wonderful thing that happened there.

Still greater things to come

Israel would soon see greater things than this, however. The widow's son of Nain was only dead for a few hours. Lazarus had been dead for four days and was decomposing. When Jesus commands him to leave the grave, however, he does so.

In the face of the Lord of life death has to make way.

How was it possible then that people could think that they could get rid of Him by killing Him? After three days his angels roll away the rock covering the opening to the grave, He rolls up the cerements which had covered Him and puts them to one side. He does not only effect life and death, He *is* life.

What had happened in Nain was simply a flash, a symbol of the history of the world. The history of the world is a movement towards the grave. Today you carry somebody there, tomorrow you yourself are carried there. And nobody can stop the dark procession and make it change direction ...

No, you are wrong. Nain is a joyous prophecy that there is ONE who is more powerful than death. When He encountered death, He did not stand still quietly to one side so that death, who respects no-one, could complete the procession gravewards. No, death had to make way for Him, turn around in its tracks, and return to life.

History: a path of life, not death

This miracle still occurs today. When somebody converts, he turns around in his tracks 180 degrees. He takes the opposite direction. He does not follow the path of death any more, but the path of life. People who have been condemned to spiritual death return to life.

But Nain (and Easter) tells an even more glorious story.

Whoever has met the King of life sees the history of the world no longer as a long, black, weeping funeral procession, because whoever has come to know Him already sees a crowd so vast it cannot be counted. Not in black funeral weeds, but in white festive clothing. They have just risen from the grave - no less surprised than the young man from Nain. The grave - so strongly linked to the old world, has been left behind. They are new people, in a new world. As the people of Nain return to their village in transports of joy, so this crowd enters the new Jerusalem.

And in this city there is no room for disease, for death and tears any longer, because: The Lord of life is in our midst!

Chapter 13

MOSES ON NEBO

(Deuteronomy 34:1-12)

To the east of the place where the River Jordan runs into the Dead Sea one finds Mount Nebo. Somebody is slowly ascending its steep incline. Alone - as each of us will finally have to toil up the last incline of death.

It is a man. Moses. One of the greatest among men: scholar, leader, legislator, writer, poet and prophet. A prophet like this would never appear in Israel again (verse 10). We feel dwarfed by this giant. But his greatness was all grace - for ultimately he was only a man like us.

I would like to divide my message into three main points:

- * How Moses ascended the mountain
- * What Moses experienced on the mountain
- * What Moses's grave on the plain means to us

1. How Moses went up the mountain

Moses went up there as a lonely, griefstricken and disappointed man.

** Lonely*

Usually there are people who will be with us in the final moments of our lives. Thus Moses and Eleazar had accompanied Aaron. Moses, however, has to leave behind everybody and ascend the road to his death alone. He was, however, not surprised by death, as the Lord had told him of it beforehand.

In this way we all have to take the last step - even though we might not know the day, the fact is incontrovertible. And even if supported by doctors, by nurses and family, you and I have to do it alone, for those around us will not be accompanying us.

Moses did not die because he was old and sick. No, his eyes were still good and his strength had not given out, even though he was 120 years old. He had to die because the task for which the Lord had called him had been completed.

** Griefstricken*

Because Moses was human it is inconceivable that he should not have been stricken by grief however bravely he was ascending the mountain. He had just said goodbye to his beloved children, his family, the whole nation.

He first had to impress the importance of the Law on them once more, wrote it up in a book and instructed the Levites to keep it for posterity next to the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord.

Then, at the command of the Lord, he wrote a grippingly beautiful hymn and taught the nation to sing it (Deuteronomy 31:30-32:44). Just think of the lovely verses 11 and 12.: "As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: so the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him".

The same song, however, contains serious warnings, not only against the seduction of heathendom when they were to enter Canaan, but also and especially against the danger of ingratitude. If it goes well with man, one tends all too easily to forget the Lord!

In the final instance Moses blessed the whole nation, tribe by tribe (Deuteronomy 33).

It was a long and stirring farewell, and something of the grief of each farewell still lingered in Moses as he left to ascend the mountain.

** Disappointed*

What other emotions would stir in Moses as he approached his death? We cannot know that, but it should be safe to assume that he was deeply disappointed. Not filled with grief because he knew he had to die, but about the fact that he had to die without seeing the fulfilment of his life's ambition.

We could say that Moses had had only one burning desire, and that was to lead the nation he had led out of Egypt and had accompanied for forty long and arduous years through the desert into the promised land.

And this burning ideal would have been realized had not Moses himself destroyed it. The people angered him so that instead of addressing the rock as explicitly commanded by God he hit it with a staff. He acted not out of faith but out of anger. And without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Moses impugned God's honour in the presence of the people, and for that reason he, together with Aaron, is subject to the same punishment as that meted out to the recalcitrant nation: after so many years of struggle and strife they are forbidden to enter the promised land!

It was a bitter punishment for Moses, one which he could not easily accept. In prayer he begged God to allow him to cross the Jordan. But the Lord refused and told him to stop talking about it any longer (Deuteronomy 3:23-26).

2. What Moses experienced on Mount Nebo

Fortunately we do not hear only of a lonely, griefstricken and disappointed Moses, because on the mountaintop he meets God and he experiences three qualities of God.

** His nearness*

What more can one want of one's last earthly journey but God's nearness? When he had to leave everybody behind and when he was relinquished by everybody, God relented towards him. What he had said to the nation during his final farewell he can now abundantly experience himself: "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deuteronomy 33:28). God is a just God, He does not allow Moses to enter the promised land. But He is also a merciful God. During Moses's last moments he, the faithful servant, is not left alone.

** God's promise*

If one climbs high, one can also see long distances. On the top of the mountain a miracle takes place: God illuminates Moses's eyes so that he can see the promised land with his own eyes. The melancholy disappears,

his eyes are illuminated by joy. What a rich and lovely country is it not! All the trouble and hardship and patience with his people had not been in vain after all ...

The Lord does the same with us. In his Word he represents something to us of the new world, the promised Canaan which will one day become the property of his children - we know that there will be no more suffering, trouble, disease and death. This will be God's second, new paradise.

It is grace to be able to see, as Moses can, the Invisible (Hebrews 11:27).

** God's faithfulness*

God had promised the land of Canaan to the fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Not one of them owned it, however. Moses did not either. But God had confirmed this with his promise to give it to their children, to all their descendants (verse 4).

And this must have been a great consolation to Moses, because he knew that what the Lord had promised He would do. His faithfulness lasts through all the ages - even in spite of our lack of faith. From the time when Moses had lain helpless in a basket in the rushes of the Nile the Lord's faithfulness never deserted him for a moment. In death, too, this is still our only security.

On the mountain Moses's faith is strengthened also by God's nearness, his promise and faithfulness that he could descend the mountain to the plains of Moab, his last resting-place.

3. What Moses's grave on the plains of Moab has to say to us today

All we know of Moses's burial is that it took place in an alien country and that the grave was unknown, but that his epitaph had been special.

** Buried in an alien land*

It is stated explicitly that Moses died in Moab and was buried by God on the plains of Moab, across from Beth-Peor. None of us would like one day to be buried in an alien place or country. In Moses's case there was the additional situation that the Moabites were a heathen nation. They were

also not well-disposed towards Israel - think about how their king Balak wanted to use Balaam to curse Israel. (After Moses the hostility between Israel and Moab would last for several centuries more).

** The site of his grave unknown*

There is a shroud of secrecy about Moses's grave. Did God bury him Himself, or did He command the angel Michael to do so? Why would Satan want his body? (Jude, verse 9). How should we understand when it is stated in the same verse exactly where God had buried him, and also that nobody knows where his grave was?

** A significant epitaph*

Naturally Moses did not have a granite gravestone with his name, dates of birth and death and an edifying inscription.

Should this have been the case, a most suitable inscription would have been "Here rests Moses, the servant of the Lord" (cf. verse 5), and under that "He knew the Lord face to face" (verse 10).

In his youth Moses had been very impulsive. But after forty years (until his eightieth year) in the desert he learnt patience, until he could be called the mildest of men. He learnt to be nothing so that God could be all. He became the mediator for his people and continually acted for them. He even once asked of God to reject him if his people could be spared that way.

A servant has the special privilege that he is in a very intimate relationship to the master, that he is in his presence, and gets to know him personally. Moses was also such a servant. He not only worked for the Lord but knew him personally ("From face to face ..."). Like Enoch (Genesis 5:24) he lived near the Lord, so near that he could be called the friend of God. It is no wonder then that he is granted the special privilege, together with Elijah, of consoling Christ on the Mount of transfiguration (cf. Matthew 17:3).

"Known God face to face." In this the deepest secret of Moses's long life and strength in faith is locked up.

As during all funerals, however, this injunction of the Lord forces us to undertake self-investigation: Do I really know the Lord? Do I only know

Christ by hearsay, or do I know Him personally? Do I walk in his proximity every day?

Before his death, Moses had given expression in the most gripping manner (in Psalm 90) to his view of the transience and the mortality of man. In this melancholic psalm there is a song of praise too, and it is most suitable that we should end this devotion with it:

O teach us, LORD, to count our days,
to set our hearts on wisdom's ways.
Turn, LORD, to us in our distress;
in pity now your servants bless.
Let mercy's dawn dispel our night,
let all our days with joy be bright.

LORD, may we with our children see
your glorious power and majesty.
O may your favor from above
come down and rest on us in love.
The work accomplished by our hand
establish, Lord - yes, make it stand.

Chapter 14

TRAVELLERS FROM AN OLD TO A NEW PARADISE

(Revelation 21:3-7, 22:1-5)

Read also:

Genesis 3:23, 24

Exodus 25:22

Matthew 27:50-51

The *theme* of our devotion is: "Travellers from an old to a new Paradise".

The three *main points* are:

- * *Exile* from a lost paradise
- * *Pilgrim* between a past and a future paradise
- * *Child* in a new paradise

1. Exile from a lost paradise

Each of us - the children too - know about the first paradise, the lush garden of Eden, the land of joy. There God and man lived like Father and child, close to each other. There Adam and Eve could experience peace and happiness.

We also know, however, what the results had been of our first ancestors's rebellion against God:

- * The lovely Paradise became a barren desert, a place of thorns and weeds, struggling and labouring, births accompanied by pain and suffering.
- * Man was also banished from his fatherland, and became an exile.

Adam and Eve, and their children and their children, now had to traverse, endlessly, a cursed earth, over which death reigned. The way back had been closed off for good, after the Lord had set angels with flaming swords to defend the entrance to the Garden.

As an exile man would live for a while, but his life would be brief - like grass which would shrivel up when the wind passed over it, and flowers of the desert which would flourish for one day only (Psalm 103).

Because we are children of God, of the Paradise, the nostalgia and the longing for our original fatherland can never die away. We know that this world is our world, but not this world of tears, disease, death and loneliness.

For that reason many people and nations try to create their own paradise here. This can never succeed, however, because only God can restore the true Paradise to us. It is only when He, our Father, returns to live with us and we become his children again, that the glory of Paradise can be restored to us. Because Paradise is synonymous with communion with God.

2. Pilgrim between a Paradise of the past and a Paradise of the future

The erstwhile child has become an exile. But the exile is also at the same time a pilgrim, through the grace of God. He does not simply roam purposelessly as an exile. He knows where he is going, even if the journey is going to take 80 years! We are often reminded in the Bible of our pilgrimage which is in progress between two Edens. I have only read one instance from the Old and one from the New Testament.

The tabernacle accompanied the Israelites on their journey to the promised land. In the inner sanctum God took up abode, as it were, and revealed Himself to his nation. He never leaves us - even if we are unfaithful. There was a heavy curtain, a veil, in front of the inner sanctum, however, which symbolized the division which had come between God and man in Paradise. Cherubs had been embroidered on the curtain and two cherubs guarded the mercy-seat of the ark. Only the High Priest could, once a year, on the Day of Reconciliation, and only with sacrificial blood staining his hands, move aside the veil and enter into the presence of God on behalf of the whole nation.

Thus: there is a memory of the erstwhile glory. But: it is imperfect. The whole nation does not yet have access to God, the cherubs are still there and the Paradise is still closed. The exiled pilgrim cannot yet return to his fatherland and be with his Father.

Fortunately the tabernacle is not simply a sad reminder of the past but also a powerful promise for the future. This promise already began to go into fulfilment with the death of Christ.

When our High Priest, Jesus Christ, offered his own blood and died on the Cross, God tore the veil of the temple (a more permanent tabernacle) from top to bottom. It was not simply, as in the old dispensation, moved aside for the entrance of the priest, no, it was torn through, as a vivid sign that it is not necessary any more for paradise to remain closed against man.

Christ died, branded a *Rebel* against God and government, in our place - for us, who are the real rebels. As an *Exile*, a banished One, He was suspended between heaven and earth. As a *Vagrant* He had no place to lay his head. As a *Child* He cried, in the terror of hell, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?".

But in so doing He opened up Paradise again. He called to all exhausted and thirsty pilgrims to join Him and to find rest. Even to a converted murderer He could say: "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise".

And as a prophecy of what would happen in the last days, many dead rose from their graves.

3. Child in a new paradise

But if this is then true, why still so many tears, so much weeping, trouble, suffering, disease and death? Why could the Lord not simply take us to Him?

We do not have the answer to all the questions. Being pilgrims means to struggle with questions which seemingly have no answer all the time. Our Father alone knows when He will give us all this.

However incomprehensible it may sound: even the fact that He does not gather us to Him immediately is a result of God's grace and long-suffering. During our pilgrimage He grants us more time to

- * convert ourselves;
- * clarify our faith;
- * live closer to Him;
- * grow in our relationship to Him;
- * intensify our longing for the new paradise.

As Christ caused the veil to tear, so will He in his advent tear the clouds and give us the new paradise. Genesis began with a paradise, and Revelation ends with a new paradise!

In Revelation 21 and 22 we hover on the edge of the history of the world. It is as if here the centuries turn in on each other and we stand at the beginning of it all again:

- * we hear the rushing of the river of life;
- * we see again the tree of life;
- * the tabernacle of God is among men again. He Himself comes to live with us again!

Because we *are* children of paradise, we can also *live* like children of paradise. This means living for the future, our eyes directed at the future full of expectation, leaving behind us the grief and the grave.

There will still be days of tears - this is part of the life of a pilgrim. But we will never grieve like people who have not hope. The joy will always be there and triumph again. Because the exhausted *exile* will finally return home. God Himself will succour the thirsty *pilgrim* with the water of life. He Himself will wipe the last tears from the eyes of his *child*.

May we also experience our pilgrimage through life in such a way that when He comes we can throw away our dusty exile's clothes, take off our worn pilgrim's sandals, and don the wedding clothes due to his children, to enter the new paradise with joyful acclamation!

YOUTH AND OLD AGE

Chapter 15

CAN THERE STILL BE HOPE AMONG THE CHRISTIAN YOUTH OF TODAY?

Thoughts on secular and Christian hope

Hope or despair influence us to the heart

Is it so important to have hope?

Yes! Hope and expectation touch us in the core of our existence. Long before Christ lived the Greek philosopher Plato had already said that "Man becomes in terms of what he hopes and how he hopes". We also have an expression to the effect that "Hope springs eternal in the human breast".

If there is no hope, then our reason for living seems to be without foundation. You can see that hope has to do with the most profound sense of our lives.

Some concrete examples: If I no longer have hope for the future of my country, it becomes senseless to do anything. I need not do my best any longer at school - is it still worthwhile to go to school, to college, to technikon or university? It also becomes meaningless to think of practising a profession, to marry and to have children. And don't think that this is idle talk! Recently I heard local schoolchildren say that they do not choose certain school subjects because they won't be able to do anything with them if they have to leave the country. They would rather choose subjects that might be useful in a new fatherland. A young honours student told me that he and his family are moving to South America. On TV one sees that thousands of people - White and Black - leave South Africa.

Despair, lack of hope, can have several consequences. Apart from flight - to a country which might seem to offer more hope (is there such a place on earth?) - there is also the attitude of *carpe diem*: grab the day, let us eat, drink and be merry while there is still time. Or there might be a defeatist attitude, a giving up of all hope.

Hope offers strength. Despair paralyses, kills.

For that reason the task facing us here glows with topicality, especially for young people whose future still faces them; especially for the Christian youth (from all races) who know God as a God of hope and his Word as a Book of hope.

It is our young men who have to do National Service and might be forced to take another person's life. And it is our young women who have to bring children into this life for the grim purpose of becoming cannon fodder...

It is to be expected that unbelieving, godless people should have no hope (cf. Poverbs 10:28 and Ephesians 2:12). But believers?

What the future of South Africa is going to look like

Faber futuri sui (man is the creator of his own future) is a very popular concept (even among Christians today). There is even a science called Futurology (Science of the Future), which aims at predicting the future scientifically.

This is human. Man would like to see his future. He is not willing to hold on to the invisible. From the perspective of the present future projections are then made. In this way a calculable, inevitable - one could almost say a closed, immutable - image of the future is created, which is, in any case, a man-made future.

I do not simply and coldly reject Futurology, but only ask whether God's future would be the same as man's "science of the future".

Many things taught by Futurology warn us in advance and strongly to do something quickly. This is more especially so if we hear things such as the following: plant and animal species are being made extinct at the rate of one per day, and 25% of what remains will have been destroyed in the course of the next 25 years; in Africa alone 74 million people die of hunger; if pollution of the environment (soil, water, air) continues at the present rate, life won't be possible much longer even in the rich Westernized countries.

You can supplement the apocalyptic nightmares by listening to the daily news: AIDS, terrorism, air disasters, the nuclear threat, wars, earthquakes, floods, droughts, increasing godlessness and a hundred other things which will only become worse in future.

Let us look at what is being predicted for South Africa in the political field for the near future. Most Blacks (and many Whites) believe that South Africa will soon have a Black majority government. The old ideal of separate states has been destroyed irrevocably. (The present talk about own and community affairs is simply a last vestige of apartheid which has to disappear.) The big question, of course, is whether this unitary state will allow something like power-sharing (not the present division of power). Will South Africa simply go the way of all Africa, where, following independence, little or nothing remained for Whites?

A *majority* government need not be an *exclusive* government, of course. If God could, under a White minority government, allow many good things to happen, this is also possible under a Black majority government. A Black government *as such* is not diabolical. We should be wary of trying to annex God for ourselves!

Just before a Black government takes over, we will, the experts say, have to go through either of two phases: either a *degenerative collapse* (the government unable to handle the present unrest, Black leaders murdered, violence washes over into White areas and finally total anarchy), or *authoritarian control* (sanctions and Black and White terrorism increases, though as a result of strong government control anarchy is prevented and superficially it might seem as if there is order, while the last bit of freedom goes down the drain). A choice between these two (either chaos or a dictatorship) seems to be a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea.

I can understand that the future seems rather bleak for White youth - and equally for Black youth - if this is the kind of scenario that we see for our future. Our hope has been destroyed by history ... or ...does the problem lie with what we understand by hope? Does hope mean to have an expectation of the future in terms of what one sees happening now? (In other words, this would mean projecting a future on the basis of the bleak events of the present.) Or does true Christian hope mean seeing the unseeable? "Faith gives *substance* to our hopes, and makes us *certain of realities we do not see*" (Hebrews 11:1; cf. also Romans 8:24, 25).

It is not *ostrich* politics (closing your eyes, sticking your head in a hole in the ground and hope for the best), but the hope of a soaring *eagle*. True

hope allows one to soar like an eagle, to see new, undreamed of perspectives.

False hope

To understand what the Bible teaches about true hope, to understand this well, it might be necessary first to unmask all sorts of forms of false hope besetting mankind.

For many people hope is the same as a wish. Wishful thinking, however, means doubtful certainty and no securely founded expectation. For others it is - as we have already seen - simply a projection, an arbitrary anticipation - which can easily change into despair.

It is important, however, to note what South Africans today are basing their hopes on. And if we look carefully, we will see that we do not differ significantly from the Israel of the Old Testament. We still put our hope in idols - modern idols - while God (cf. Hab. 2:18, 19) keeps on warning his people against that. Have things such as our own prosperity, safety, survival, freedom and peace not become the one and all?

God unceasingly warns against Mammon (e.g. in Job 31:23, 24). In South Africa we have seen how prosperity has rendered true hope impossible. (People who do not know poverty, unemployment and hunger, don't see they need hope!) And if the economy should collapse, hope counts even less. (A future without prosperity does not sound very enticing to most South Africans!)

God warns us against the security ideology. Whoever wants to safeguard his own life will lose it (cf. Matthew 10:39). Trust in man (Psalm 148:3, 4 and Jeremiah 17:5), in soldiers, weapons and foreign powers (Isaiah 31:1-3; Hosea 10:13b, 14) will gain us nothing, as it did not gain anything for Israel of old.

One also cannot even put one's hope in the church or Christendom. Do read the whole of the - terrifying - Jeremiah 7 under the heading of false trust in the temple!

Many people today maintain that the strong church and Christendom in South Africa constitute our only hope for the future. But is the church truly

the bearer of hope in South Africa? Are the White and Coloured churches - and the national churches in their turn - not hopelessly divided at present? (The Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church rejects apartheid as unbiblical and the White Dutch Reformed Synod tries to justify it. One church opposes violence, the SACC defends it). For many Whites the church is still the last bastion for the maintenance of the White race!

One could even say that the Church is one of the strongest divisive factors in the country. People of the same church family hate and mistrust each other!

How can such a divided church offer a message of hope? Has it not murdered hope? Should we not use the church as wailing wall, as the Jews in Jerusalem do?

All the things that Jeremiah warned about so long ago are happening in our churches today. And the silence from most pulpits and synods continues ...

All this means that we cannot in general terms talk of "Christian hope for South Africa". The quest for hope is not neutral and the response is not neutral either. A privileged White Christian's hope will differ entirely from that of an underprivileged Black.

In the Middle Ages heavenly hope was expected to have a refining effect on earthly hope. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century wanted to pull hope to the earth and realize it here and now. We tend to shift hope to the future, to the final days, to a new heaven and a new earth.

It is no wonder, then that many Black Christians have decided that a mere hope directed at the future means nothing for their lives here and now, and they have retained only a worldly, socio-political expectation - a totally secularized, utopian eschatology.

Are people so wrong when they maintain that waiting for the last day is simply a flight into piety? Are they wrong when they maintain that justice will not merely reign on the new earth, but should be realized *now* in South Africa? We should at least be able to see some concrete signs of the coming times!

It is only when Christians and churches (on both sides of the colour bar) truly convert and confess guilt that there is still hope for South Africa. Or is it already too late and has God begun to leave us to stew in our own sins, so that we approach a precipice?

True hope

The great mistake made by false hope is that the *source* and the *content* of the hope are wrong. The source is man, and it is directed at something in this world. And all things on earth are subject to corruption and decay - while true hope is indestructible and immutable.

Why? Because God Trinitarian is the source and the content of hope. The source is not located in hopeful people, and the content is not the future which man can shape. In his sinful state he can only create a despairing future!

As against man's predicted future (*futurus*) there is God's future (*adventus*). The latter does not mean that we move towards the future, but that God is coming to us. He is our Future. (God's advent on earth runs through Scripture like a golden thread - and finally heaven descends on earth. God does not take us to heaven, even though many want it to be like that.)

Read the following passages from Scripture which so explicitly state that God *alone* is our hope: Romans 15:13; 2 Corinthians 1:10; 1 Timothy 1:1, 10 and 1 Peter 1:3, 4. The Bible also states clearly that the source of the hope should only be sought in the working of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Romans 15:13; Galatians 5:5).

God, the Source and Content of our hope, promised on oath that He would maintain his promises. Therefore the Letter to the Hebrews (6:18, 19) calls hope a safe and secure anchor for life. As an anchor moors a ship securely, so true Hope can, in our stormy South Africa, also offer safety and tranquillity. It is no wonder that the first Christians, in times of persecution, used the anchor as one of their Christian symbols.

But do we still *know* God's promises? Is not the reason for our being without hope that we no longer know God's promises one by one and resort to them? (You will realize how very important prayerful, daily Bible study is.)

It is clear that Christian hope is absolute, immutable and undoubting expectation that God will fulfil his promises in the near and the distant future. Hope is the long, extended arm of faith stretching to a secure future.

God does not only punish and bless at judgment day, but within time as well. For Him the future of South Africa is not a simple matter of choice between chaos and dictatorship. For Him the future is open. Whoever keeps account of God keeps account of the improbable, the uncalculable, the surprising, the new.

Our task

Does this now mean - as we say all too easily - that everything will come right because God reigns? We should simply trust in Him?

Unfortunately this is a half-truth and therefore very dangerous. Hope also has to do with faith and with love! Naturally faith and love, like hope, are also gifts of God. But at the same time the Bible uses the three in conjunction to describe our relationship with God (cf. the well-known 1 Corinthians 13, and Thessalonians 5:8). And apart from these being *gifts*, they are also *duties*!

It is also true that these three duties should never be seen in isolation from each other (1 Corinthians 13, for example, says that love believes all and hopes all, and Hebrews 11:1 and Galatians 5:5 also link faith and hope.) Faith, hope and love form an unbreakable trinity. If one is lacking, the other also deteriorates. Faith, for example, cannot exist without hope or hope without faith. We can therefore also say that the touchstone of the genuineness of love lies in faith, of faith in love, etc. The one qualifies and "fulfils" the other.

If hope, therefore, is at a low point, it shows that all is not well with our faith and our love is also not perfect. Stated differently, hope does not only have to do with what God does, but also with our obedience in faith to God's love commandment.

I hope that it is clear what I want to say. It is sacrilegious to say that God destroys our hope if we do not obey his commandments. Without faith and love there can be no expectation of hope!

Our hope is grounded in Christ's victory, especially as it emerges from his resurrection. The faithful therefore have to erect visible signs of this new life through their obedience.

Signs of resurrection, however, should also be signs of the cross. It is not possible if we evade the cross. The flame of hope can only burn bright if ignited at the cross. Christ's suffering on the cross has not been terminated but is supplemented by the suffering of the believers. How often does the Bible not enjoin us to carry his cross!

Concretely it means, therefore, that a "hope" which looks past the suffering of the poor and the helpless to a better future and eternity is not true hope. We should, as Christ carried the burden of our sins, carry their burdens too. A believer and a church without solidarity with the suffering have no message for the future.

In spite of the strenuous opposition from the side of many privileged Whites in South Africa there are indisputable Biblical proofs that God is in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. He helps those who cannot help themselves. Christian hope, after all, is there for those who do not have hope themselves!

Somebody once said words that we should keep in mind always: "The church's message of hope does not involve only the end time, but also the immediate future. Because the church often relates this message almost exclusively to eternity, room has been left for the ideal of worldly, secularized utopias to take over. As a bearer of Christian hope the church has to be willing to accept co-responsibility for the immediate socio-political future". The encouraging thing about this is that it is a White from one of the three Afrikaans churches speaking here!

The fruits

We have already said that hope offers one's life meaning, purpose, direction and security. In this sense hope is indeed a protective helmet (1 Thessalonians 5:8).

The Bible mentions more fruits. Whoever has hope lives a pure and holy life (1 John 3:3). Romans also mention security (5:5), perseverance (8:25), joy (12:12), peace and happiness (15:13).

Whoever has hope is a joyful person. And true hope cannot be taken away from us by anything. (Cf. the well-known Romans 8:38, 39).

Somebody once said that hope is like a bird beginning to sing while it is still dark because it knows that dawn is near!

It is not necessary to be limp and despairing dead branches any longer. We can be God's almond branches (cf. Jeremiah 1:11, 12) which, although it is still figuratively speaking winter in South Africa, already herald a new spring of hope to the people.

My heartfelt wish is the same given by Paul to the Romans almost 2 000 years ago. They also would not have had hope if they had only looked around them and not to God:

"And may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace by your faith in him, until, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you overflow with hope" (Romans 15:13).

Chapter 16

RUNNING A MARATHON

(1 Corinthians 9:24-26; 2 Timothy 2:5, 4:7, 8 and Hebrews 12:1-3)

You all probably know about the events which took place in 490 B.C. in Greece. A young athlete fell down dead after he had run about 42 kilometres from Marathon to Athens to bring the news about the great victory over the Persians.

It is Saturday morning, 4 February 1984. I am sitting in a car on the road between Welkom and Odendaalsrus. A spectator at a marathon. My eldest son, just 17, is doing his first marathon, and this event demands Dad's presence.

I drove ahead a little way and stopped until he could catch up again, so that I could sound the hooter or give an encouraging call as he passed. While I waited, one athlete after the other passed: long legs and short, men, some women, young ones of not more than seventeen, older and greyer ones, one even seventy-four, some running agilely, others struggling along in ungainly fashion.

Even if you do not participate in a marathon yourself, during the three and a half hours spent next to the road a number of thoughts flash through your mind, and many fleeting images are imprinted in your mind indelibly. I began to think of the many instances in the Bible where the course of life of the believer is compared to the running of a race.

This was the first time that I really understood the Biblical imagery well. And when later I reread the Scriptural sections again, Paul's image grasped my imagination even more strongly.

I won't indicate the relevant Scriptural passage each time, but would like the reader to read these again for his own enrichment and edification. They are the following: 1 Cor. 9:24-26a; 2 Tim. 2:5; 2 Tim. 4:7,8 and Heb. 12:1-3.

One could divide up Paul's ideas into (1) preceding the race, (2) during the race, and (3) the outcome of the race.

1. The preparation

Few people really know how much dedicated, persevering preparation is demanded to enable one finally to participate in a marathon. One has to do between 100 and 150 kilometres per week for months on end in order to be fit enough for the challenge. One also has to have done at least one or two half marathons already.

Strict self-discipline

And this is not all. During the preparation (as also during the actual marathon) one already has to begin denying oneself all sorts of things (Heb. 9:25). One has to check what one is eating and drinking and how much sleep one is getting. This self-discipline, in the course of which one denies all sorts of pleasures, is essential and constitutes a good training for the strong self-control which is demanded by the marathon itself.

Don't take unnecessary baggage along

Heb. 12:1 states that the athlete has to throw off every burden. He should not carry unnecessary weight along with him. His clothes should be as light and comfortable as possible. All excess fat has to be burnt off before the race starts.

The athlete also has to make sure that he knows all the rules (2 Tim. 2:5). He has to practise so that observance of the rules will by the time of the actual race have become second nature.

In similar fashion the marathon of the Christian also demands thorough preparation - practice and once again practice in faith.

In order to be able to do this, there are many things which one has to take leave of. In the stress and strain of modern life time *has* to be made for Scripture reading and prayer. It is only by applying strict self-discipline that one's spiritual muscles can become limber enough to make one fit for the race. It does not help to get up early one morning for a spiritual devotional session, and to remain lying in bed four mornings in a row. If an athlete

had such an attitude towards his athletics, he might as well remain behind when the marathon starts.

The heaviness of the legs

Among the burdens which might inhibit an athlete, the author of the Hebrews book explicitly mentions sin. Sin is a burden, it causes us to move with difficulty. Whoever has not learnt to say no to sinful old nature should not venture onto the racetrack of faith - he will definitely fail.

Guidelines

We are accompanied in this by the rules for life, the commandments of the Lord. God did not give us these laws or norms to make life unpleasant (we do not have a grumpy God, rather a joyful One), but precisely to offer us life in its fulness. For that reason He has clearly outlined to us how the Christian athlete should behave. Whoever then does not comply with the rules might reach the tape, might even reach it first, but won't gain anything from it, because he/she might well be disqualified. And this means that he might as well have saved himself the trouble of running in the first place - it will have been in vain.

We see such people around us all the time. They run hard, do well, become rich - all in vain. Because God calls them fools, the godless ones. As an athlete can win dishonestly, so they have also attained what they have with bribery, corruption, lovelessness, even murder.

2. On the track

It is five to six. Each person has entered and has a number pinned to his/her chest. Four hundred and fifty athletes, dressed in running shorts and T-shirts of practically every colour of the rainbow are warming up for the long road that lies ahead.

A personal struggle - against oneself

The announcer does the countdown by the minute. Parents and loved ones say goodbye, encourage athletes, and promise to hold thumbs. After

this each athlete will stand on his own, in a struggle not only against uphill sectors, wind and long kilometres, but against the self.

In this not an exact parallel with one's struggle in faith? In the final analysis this is a struggle that one has to undertake on one's own, personally, and this is in essence a struggle against one's own sinful desires.

Thus it is better to live each moment *coram Deo*, in the face of the Lord, also when it is tempting to try and hide behind the mass with the argument of "Everybody does it".

The starter fires the shot. The multi-coloured multitude starts moving, a veritable mass of arms and legs.

They are sifted ...

Soon the whole bundle elongates, becomes a long, winding rope. It soon seems clear who is going to gain the tape first ...

But after about fifteen kilometres it becomes clear that I have judged wrongly. Some of the early front runners begin to fall back. Experts say that they are inexperienced, that they started out too fast, and thus exhausted themselves.

Don't we also find this kind of believers especially among young people? They start out so promisingly, with full commitment, and they run in front. But stamina becomes a problem, and they cannot sustain the pace. The difference between "men" and "boys" becomes painfully clear!

Slackening, however, is not only a problem for the greenhorns on the athletics track. Older and more experienced marathonners, who have completed ten and more marathons, will tell you that the temptation to give up is insidiously present whenever one runs a marathon. They say that this usually happens at about 30 kilometres, when one has done more than half the marathon. Suddenly it feels as if one has run into a wall, one's energy has gone, cramps plague one, and one feels dizzy.

Dropping out

Hebrews (12:3) also talks of spiritual weariness and dropping out. In the marathon of faith this is also not strange. Is there anyone among us who has not been spiritually exhausted, at a low point?

The great secret, however, is not to succumb to this temptation, not to fall out from the track. (Such dropouts are common today. Some, who reach for the sleeping pills, the gun, the razor blade and the carbonmonoxide from the car exhaust, are just more radical than those who simply decide to be passengers.) No, you simply have to keep on, because after a kilometre or two reserve energy is suddenly released.

Don't now overstep the rules and run the risk of being disqualified. (During the marathon the participants, of course, are not allowed to use drugs and the spectators along the road should not offer help in the form of all sorts of sustaining drinks).

Refreshments points

Each marathon runner will be able to tell you how wonderful it is to reach a watering point after about three kilometres. There you receive a sponge dipped in cold water to sponge your glowing face, head and torso, and a plastic glass of cold water or another drink to cool your burning throat and dry mouth and to replace liquid that your body has lost. And don't forget the encouraging words of those manning the watering points: "Come on! Keep it up! Only nine kilometres to go!"

One is therefore not wholly alone along the road. There are those helping and encouraging you. This made me think again of Hebrews 12 which begins with the following words: "As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us". By referring to the crowd of witnesses the author is referring to the heroes of the faith whom he had already described in the previous chapter (11). These witnesses, who have already completed the marathon of faith, are now the spectators, who encourage those who are still running.

The inspiration to keep on

It is the same in one's own life. Pious parents - and even grandparents who have already departed this life - will be a shining example of a godly way of life which can be a very strong inspiration. And if you are not so privileged as to have such people around, there are still the many figures from the Bible, some of whom are described in Hebrews 11, who have completed the worthy struggle. Their tracks are as clear as a line of phosphorus in the course of history, so that we need not get lost or give up the struggle.

The watering points made me think not only of the already triumphing church, but also of the still struggling church. If the church is truly a real church, then one is refreshed there by the communion of the holy, by the fresh water of the gospel of Christ. As the watering points occur at regular intervals along the route, so we also have one out of each seven days of the week when we can be refreshed again for the often demanding shift of six days confronting us.

Not the legs, but the spirit will have the final say ...

There are many books available today not only about the physiology of the marathon athlete, but also about his psychology, and these books are eagerly read by the athletes. In order to be able to run well, one has to know not only one's own body, but also one's own spirit.

Many of the things mentioned in these books, however, had been written down in the Bible two thousand years ago, for example that one should never begin to doubt oneself. "That is why I run straight for the finishing-line" (1 Corinthians 9:26). One need not necessarily be certain of *winning*, but of *finishing* the marathon - preferably within the four and a half hours required for qualifying.

Absolute certainty

Certainty of faith! Whoever does not have this, should not even venture onto the often punishing race of faith. If you do not know *why* you are running or *what* you are running for, and if you are not convinced that it is *worthwhile*, stay away from the track. Faith, it is maintained by the same

book of the Hebrews, is to be certain of the things we hope for, to be convinced of those that we cannot see (11:1)

Go on!

What especially struck me during the Maize Marathon was the way in which the runners looked to the front. Some even showed irritation if one wanted to shout a word of encouragement, as this broke their concentration or distracted their attention. There was no looking to left or right or, heaven forbid, backwards.

Paul, who knew his own world so well, and probably had seen many races, also gives the same prescription for the race of faith (which he adheres to himself): "... the one thing I do, however, is to forget what is behind me, and do my best to reach what is ahead. So I run straight towards the goal in order to win the prize ..." (Philippians 3:13, 14).

Yes, one's past, or even just the thought of it, can be a strong braking force. If one is going to mope all the time and feel paralysed by it, one will be unable to get up and run - we all know about the paralysing effect of guilt feelings or resentment because of what others have done to us. (You all know of the effect that a love quarrel or problems at home between children or between parents and children can have on your work or studies.) That is why it is essential to sort out problems of this kind immediately, so that you won't be tripped up by the problems at a time when you can't afford it at all.

The athlete's vision is fixed on one thing only: the finish line.

With the eye directed at Him

On what should the eye of faith be fixed? Not on a thing, the Book of Hebrews say, but on Someone. "Let us keep our eye fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end" (12:2). Our faith begins in Him, and He gives us strength through his Spirit to complete the race of faith.

Hebrews represents it as if Christ as Frontrunner has opened the track and has completed it, in spite of his humiliation on the Cross. Our marathon of life can also be successful if we keep our eyes on the finish line without

deviating either to the right or the left, following the great Marathon runner, Jesus Christ. What we have to endure in the course of our life cannot begin to be compared with what He had to endure during the brief thirty-three years of his life on earth. His Cross is our strength!

With the eyes directed at Him, the believer will be able to attain the finish line.

3. The finish line

This is an exciting place. Among the mass of spectators the excitement knows no limits!

Each starter's ideal is to complete the marathon in under three hours, but those who do attain this are not very numerous.

The winners honoured

The arrival of the front runner is heralded with great excitement. And when he breaks the tape, the cheering is deafening.

Then follow the second, the third, all the other sub-3's. Also the first woman athlete, the oldest competitor (74 years, 39 marathons and ten Comrades marathons of 87,4 kilometres each!) are welcomed warmly at the finish line.

They also made it

Then it is the turn of the "ordinary" participants (are they so ordinary?). They are divided into the first 100, the first 200, and so forth. Apart from the cloth badge they also receive a small wooden shield with a metal plate attached to it to indicate among which group of winners they had finished. They also receive a beer or a Coke and a hotdog.

The nice thing about the event for me was that no prizes were given to the winners before all the stragglers had also been welcomed at the finish line. They too were winners because they had completed the race, persevered to the end. For the very last participant to arrive there was a special prize: a black T-shirt to say that he was last!

Are people mad?

As a bystander many a spectator might have thought to himself that all this was excessive effort for a piece of cloth and a wooden plaque. This is precisely what Paul says in 1 Cor. 9:25 - it is a transient victor's crown. He and the Corinthians well knew the Isthmus Games which were held every second year. On this occasion the Greek athlete who won received the coveted laurel wreath. Although this lasted for a while, eventually it did wilt - like the fame attached to it.

What then is the prize in the race of faith?

A special crown for the victorious

It is also a crown or a wreath.

Yet it is an *everlasting* wreath (1 Cor. 9:25), which will never wilt.

Because it is a *heavenly* crown (Phil. 3:14).

It is a crown of *righteousness* (2 Tim. 4:8, King James Version). The recipient of the crown of victory is just in the eyes of God. It is - even though we might not realize it - a wage of mercy for perseverance awarded only on the basis of what Christ had gained for us.

It is the crown of *glory* (1 Pet. 5:4), a glory of which any athlete who has completed a marathon can have but a pale inkling, because no man can describe this.

At the prize-giving: God's great surprise

When are the prizes handed over? Christ personally will hand them over when He comes again (2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pet. 5:4) and when we all rise from our graves.

Who will accept the prize?

Here there is another great surprise from God! It will not simply be a prize, but *prizes*. It is not only one who will receive the prize, but all of them (2 Tim. 4:8) who have completed the marathon of faith.

Everybody has to participate

In the marathon of faith there are no outsiders or spectators. (Only those who have already completed it will be allowed on the grandstand.)

Each Christian has to participate in the marathon of faith - also those confined to a bed or a wheelchair. Nobody will complete it without hard training, self-discipline, hardship and struggle - especially against oneself - and even tears.

But the joy to be tasted upon completion (Heb. 12:2b) is so indescribably great - especially because it is eventually completed as an act of grace - that it gives new courage and strength again to persevere.

Shortly before his death Paul wrote with great conviction to Timothy: "I have done my best in the race, I have run the full distance, I have kept the faith. And now there is waiting for me the prize of victory awarded for a righteous life, the prize which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day" (2 Tim. 4:7, 8).

Will you and I also be able to give such testimony when our last moments arrive?

Two warnings

Dear students and all young people, remember two things:

Your Christian way of life does not begin - like your profession - on the day when you leave the University. It already began when you were baptized and your parents brought you up in the fear of the Lord, and especially since your confession of faith when you consciously chose that way.

Further: A Christian way of life is not like a serene walk undertaken in the evening with your (girl)friend, wandering along the oak lanes - it is a demanding marathon, even on the campus. There are students here too who will rather discourage you from the comfort of their chairs than encourage you.

But don't deviate to right or left. Sustain the race to the end! Run hard to convey the good news (the gospel) of Christ's conquest of evil - even though you have to die at the end, like the first Greek marathon athlete.

Chapter 17

SPIRITUAL PREPAREDNESS IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE

(Ephesians 6:10-18)

Why do we as believers so often fear?

Surely there is nothing to fear - not even death referred to in 1 Corinthians 15. In the closing section of this chapter Paul calls on the believers to "stand firm and immovable ..." (verse 57). And later on: "Be alert; stand firm in the faith; be valiant and strong" (1 Corinthians 16:13). When he himself is in prison awaiting execution, Paul says: "For the spirit that God gave to us is no craven spirit, but one to inspire strength, love and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). It also emerges clearly from Hebrews (12:12) that God does not expect weak knees and useless hands.

The fact that bravery, courage and preparedness are not coincidental traits of Christians, but an essential one, emerges from Revelation 21:8 where the fearful are mentioned together with the unbelievers, murderers, lechers, idolators and liars as people who are condemned to eternal hell. It is striking to note that fearfulness is the quality right at the top of the scale!

I would like to use one Scriptural section to illuminate, firstly, our enemy and secondly the weapons to be used in countering the enemy.

1. Prepared: against what?

The Scriptural section is the well-known Ephesians 6:10-18. Paul is here incarcerated in the prison in Rome, most probably, as the custom was then, chained to a Roman soldier. In any event it is probable that he writes to the Ephesians in the image of the armour of the Roman soldier and urges them to don the armour of faith. (We could today do the same as the basic equipment of the soldier has not changed all that much and a soldier still needs boots, a helmet, etc.)

How does Paul describe the enemy of the Christian? "For our fight is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark world, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavens" (verse 12).

* *Powerful*: It is clear in the first place that according to Paul we should not under-estimate the enemy. He indicates the enemy by referring to three groups: authorities and potentates, and superhuman forces.

* *Spiritual*: Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the evil forces, against all kinds of un-Christian ideologies and visions of life which haunt the human spirit. Behind military onslaughts there is often a more fundamental struggle: the struggle between visions of life. We have to look beyond the obvious and test the gods to determine whether they emanate from God (1 John 4:1). The spirit of apostasy is the enemy of the Spirit of truth (1 John 4:6). Look at the fruits of the Spirit of truth (Galatians 5:22) as against that of the sinful human being (Galatians 5:19-21), and you will realize that a friendship between the Spirit reigning over the Christian and the spirit inspiring the non-believer is not possible.

If we are so well armed against enemies that are visible and audible, that we can easily outwit them (as is the case in South Africa at present) how much more should we not be able to do this with the invisible enemies which pollute the spirit of man - enemies that are not only invisible but also intangible and sometimes inaudible. It is really humanly impossible to fight against such an enemy.

* *Darkness*. This is not an enemy which attacks in broad daylight and enters into a hand-to-hand battle. It walks in darkness, so that it is invisible. It also casts darkness over the spirit of man in spite of representing itself as an angel of light.

* *Cunning*. In the previous verse (4) Paul already states who the big brain is behind the dark forces which will try to undermine us: nobody less than Satan. He is a seducer, liar, betrayer, he is genocidal, an enemy of God, and his followers are cunning and crafty and deceitful.

The danger is real that this enemy will overcome man before any shot has been fired because he uses the most insidious of all weapons - fear. Because he is invisible, intangible and often inaudible, the danger is not

imaginary that he can make the enemy retreat in disorder before a single shot has fallen.

There is absolute seriousness in the call of Paul (Ephesians 6:11-12). This emerges among others from the fact of the *invisibility* and the *total power advantage* of Satan and his cohorts, from the *cunning, deceitful way* in which this enemy works and the fact that Paul uses *martial terms* throughout (verses 11-17). The struggle with evil is no less than an outright war! He stresses that this spiritual struggle is just as real, intense and direct as an encounter between two wrestlers.

Where does one find weapons to oppose an enemy which surrounds you every moment and may even be lodged within your heart all the time, so that you can never focus on it properly?

This brings us (following the preceding question, viz. prepared against *what*) to the second question: using *what* kind of weapons?

2. Prepared: using what?

In general we can say the following about the armour proposed by Scripture:

2.1 A full suit of armour lies ready

* *Ready*: We need not go looking for weapons, to make them or to invent them. All we have to do is to take up the weapons given us by God and to fight the enemy. We can therefore train for the struggle in advance and do not have to start looking for better weapons in a panic when the battle starts - because we have under-estimated the enemy. We can also know our weapons - something which is a prerequisite for success in a battle situation. One can have all the weapons in the world but if one does not know how to use them, a small but skilful force can rout a much larger one in a trice!

* *Complete*: It is a full armour lacking nothing. All attacks can be countered by it. Apart from being a defensive weapon it is also an offensive one. The idea is that we should be wearing the armour at all times. The Christian

always has to be ready and prepared because evil is deceitful and attacks at the most unexpected moment.

* *Spiritual*: The weapons are spiritual because it is a spiritual struggle against evil spirits. The heavenly Father does not send his children into the struggle without the most suitable armour. Moreover, the weapons that He gives are not impersonal instruments, but a person, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the power of God, and has written us a book - the Bible - to equip us for the struggle.

2..2 The weapons looked at separately

Let us look at these weapons which we can use to offer resistance in the day of evil.

* *"Fasten on the belt of truth"*

The belt worn by soldiers in those days was not really a weapon, but the soldier could not go without it. The strong belt held up his tunic so that he should not fall over it. It also held the weapons, such as the sword, in position.

The believer defends Truth but also with the help of Truth struggles against the lie. How much falseness, deceit and lying do we not find in every field today. Lying propaganda rules the world! The Christian struggles with or together with the Truth. He can only remain standing because he has something worthwhile to defend. The Christian soldier struggles for Truth on the side of Truth! As will still emerge, this truth is the Word of God.

You should not underestimate this struggle for the truth. It even elicits the formidable opposition of Satan himself. This war has been going on throughout history - it runs from Genesis to Revelation.

Eve listened to Satan and so entered into an agreement with him, but God then instituted enmity (Genesis 3:15). This will be a struggle between life and death: man will try to crush Satan's head, while the old serpent will bite man in the heel. Throughout the struggle following this, of which part has been recorded for us in the Bible, Satan tries to work on man's fear of death (God's penalty for his association with Satan) to draw him away from God. It is clear, however, that the believer has, in Christ, overcome the fear

of death. Abraham did not perish in its sight, because he was willing to sacrifice his only son. In this way many Biblical figures demonstrate their immunity to death, because they believe in Christ, who overcame death.

The Bible is also clear on the point that the struggle between light and darkness will become sharper the nearer we approach the end. At the end it is not the Christian but Christ who is the Victor. The final call for help of the believer is: "Come, Lord Jesus!"

* *"For coat of mail put on integrity"*

The coat of mail had to cover and protect the vulnerable organs such as the heart. (Today there are bulletproof vests for this purpose.)

The Christian soldier's heart is the most vulnerable of his organs and has to be protected well (Proverbs 4:23). If somebody's heart contains doubt, having been affected by the lie, then the struggle is lost. "Heart" is here used not in the sense of the physical pump which sends blood through the body, but in the religious sense. Man's *heart* is his religious centre, the most basic motive force behind his actions. Whoever controls the heart or spirit of a person directs his whole life. For that reason it is safeguarded by integrity and justice. This means that the believer stands in the right relationship of obedience to God's laws - a justice which he can only share with in Christ. This has the implication that Satan cannot any longer ensnare a man by pointing out his sinfulness to him, as he has been redeemed in Christ.

At the same time it means that the Christian has to live a life of integrity and justice - and not go in for injustice, oppression and violence. He is struggling for a good cause, for more justice in the world, and not for personal gain.

Is this clear? It is not oppression, exploitation and violence which make one strong, but rather obedience to the will of the Lord. Do we as a nation still know this powerful weapon?

* *"Let the shoes on your feet be the gospel of peace ..."*

Once again, as in the case of the preceding weapons, the shoes are not strictly speaking weapons - at least not attack weapons, but rather means

of protection. You will understand, however, that a soldier without substantial shoes on his feet is very vulnerable, even though he might be armed to the teeth in all other respects. He won't be able to march long distances over rough terrain because his feet would soon be battered and bleeding. The Roman boots (often with nails in the soles) allowed the soldier to keep his feet warm in the cold, to keep his footing on slippery soil and to maintain his balance in heavy fighting.

The Christian soldier's shoes are the willingness to work for the gospel of peace. The gospel makes us ready, prepared and in fighting trim. This is in contrast to what many Christians believe - for the gospel does not make us passive, ready to sit back. Many of us still think that the gospel is only concerned with the salvation of our "immortal souls" and has nothing to do with our everyday existence. No, the gospel is rather the marching orders for us to render every corner of the world of service to our Great Officer, Jesus Christ.

Gospel does not mean passivity but activity! Paul does not compare the gospel with soft comfortable slippers, but rather with soldiers's boots which are meant for marching, for overcoming difficult terrain.

Note, however, that it is a gospel of *peace*. The Christian soldier struggles on the side of peace. Is this not what the whole world so desperately wants today? Bloody wars are fought - so that there can be peace again. What supreme irony!

Satan, the enemy we are dealing with here, does not want peace, but is forever inciting people and nations against each other. He finds the greatest pleasure in furthering hatred and enmity. For that reason there can never be a peace treaty with him - it would mean betrayal of our King of Peace.

The believer has found true, lasting peace in God, and for that reason he can never accept the surrogate offered by the prince of darkness. No, his feet burn to take the message of peace to all nations, languages and peoples (cf. Matthew 5:9 and Hebrews 12:14).

Peace with God, and therefore peace among mankind. Have we already used this weapon fully in South Africa? After the Soweto riots of 1976 and all that followed, have we not tried to flee or to incite hatred on both sides?

Have we been willing to take the gospel to all? Those who say that they refuse to give money to the church or for Bible distribution because Blacks burn Bibles and churches, speak with the tongues of fools. In the true believer there is the willingness to persist in fulfilling God's command through self-denial, even under the most difficult of circumstances, even when contempt rains down from one's own people. The true believer will unconditionally persevere with God's command to take his Word to all mankind: "Go forth therefore and make all nations my disciples upon earth" (Matthew 28:19). Christ Himself adds to this: "And be assured, I am with you always, to the end of time".

** "Take up the great shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one"*

Up to this point we are already sufficiently armed, but Paul has not yet described the full armour. There is still the large, square shield that the Roman legionary used in battle to protect himself against unexpected onslaughts, such as a sudden arrow from the bow of an enemy. (The smaller, lighter, more mobile shield, held in the hand, had to give protection in hand to hand fighting.)

We have already pointed out the true treachery of the enemy. This shield, however, could stop the vicious arrows which might otherwise penetrate some place not covered by the coat of armour. Even the type of arrow dipped in a kind of incendiary material (the "petrol bombs" of the time!) could be quenched before they could reach their goal: death or destruction.

Our shield is faith. Is it necessary for me to tell fellow Christians more about the power of faith? Faith which can move mountains? The faith which allows us to stand firm against slander, deception and incitement to doubt and unbelief?

Above all else we need faith in the cross and resurrection of Christ. Because we have this faith, viz. that death is not the end but the beginning of a new life, we need have no fear, we can be firm, immovable, fearless in the midst of the struggle. In many places Scripture teaches that faith destroys fear.

In a certain sense spiritual preparedness is thus not something which man has to *acquire* - one already *possesses* it in faith.

We live in times in which there is perhaps more need than ever for people to do their daily work in an atmosphere of firm trust in God, people who can see further than the visible dangers of the moment.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:8 we read: "... but we, who belong to the daylight must keep sober, armed with faith and love for coat of mail and the hope of salvation for helmet". It is interesting that faith, hope and love are all called weapons in this text. Did you know that love is also a weapon? A powerful weapon? Usually it is believed that hatred makes one strong and love makes one weak, but it is love of God, of your fellowman, of your country which makes you invincible.

** "Take salvation for helmet, for sword take that which the Spirit gives you - the words that come from God"*

The helmet had to cover and protect the head and divert blows directed at the head. The helmet is therefore a defensive weapon, while the sword is an attack weapon. Naturally the sword could also be used for self-defence, but in the first place this was the weapon by means of which one could tackle the enemy.

It is striking that the sword is really the only attack weapon which Paul mentions. We have to draw the conclusion then that the task of the Christian is primarily to defend, to maintain, to preserve, and not to go over to the offensive, to attack unless forced to. This does not mean, however, that the task of the Christian is simply negatively defensive. He has a positive calling. The unbeliever is not the thesis and the Christian the antithesis. The Christian posits the thesis, the positive, while evil is only able to change this into the negative, the antithesis: putting evil against good, wrong against right, ugly against beautiful, etc. Evil parasitizes on the good, and is not able to establish anything positive.

Our defensive spiritual weapons are there to enable us to carry on with this positive struggle. Compare Nehemiah who had to defend with the sword while building the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 4:17-18). This is also true for us today: in order to be able to build in the realm of light (the positive), we have to struggle against the forces of the dark (the negative).

Through struggling, we build. In our sinful world we can only labour *for* God by continually struggling *against* Satan! Cf. also Titus 2:11, 12: "... the grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all mankind ... by it we are disciplined to renounce godless ways and worldly desires, and to live a life of temperance, honesty and godliness in the present age, looking forward to the happy fulfilment of our hope ...".

It is therefore not correct to maintain that the Christian *both* attacks and defends, as this would indicate a split, while the concern is with concentration: defence *in* the attack, attack *in* defence.

The helmet of salvation indicates the protection of the saving liberating Word of God. The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God, called a two-edged sword elsewhere in the Bible (Hebrews 4:12). The Bible can therefore be used for both defence and attack. During Christ's temptation in the desert He offered a striking example of how Satan can be deflected by quoting Scripture. The Word should also be used, however, to attack and to destroy evil.

It is important that the sword is called the sword *of the Spirit* (given to us by the Holy Spirit). The believer does not struggle with physical violence: "Neither by force of arms nor by brute strength, but by my spirit, says the Lord of Hosts" (Zachariah 4:6). The Holy Spirit is the force which enables us to conquer the evil spirits. Through the Holy Spirit we can become truly prepared spiritually. Spiritual preparedness is not simply a general qualification of a beautiful nature, a strong personality, mature actions, etc. *No, it means quite concretely that the Spirit resides in you* and has made a new person of you. The mentioned traits (personality, etc.) are the *result* and not the *root* of spiritual preparedness.

The Holy Spirit has given us the Word of God and by knowing the Word of God we also get to know the power of the Spirit. We may not separate the Spirit from the Word, or the Word from the Spirit.

What is spiritual preparedness? *Nothing other than to be equipped for the whole of life through the whole Word of God!* For that reason one might as well write spiritual preparedness as Spiritual preparedness (with a capital "S"). Only those who have been reborn through the Holy Spirit can be prepared and ready. This is a fundamental, religious, preparedness, and

not simply preparedness of one facet (the "spirit") as supposed by the current dualism of body and soul.

2..3 The spirit in which the weapons have to be handled

"... to this end keep watch and persevere, always interceding for all God's people ..."

Prayer is not a separate weapon (Paul also does not compare it with part of the armour). It is the *spirit in which* the Christian has to handle his armour. Prayer is the most direct connecting line with the Source of Power, with our Great Officer Himself. For that reason it makes you strong and prepared, and offers courage to continue the struggle.

Should we not again remind ourselves that the honest, warm prayer of a believer can achieve a great deal? Paul makes three demands to which prayer has to conform: pleading, persevering and unselfish.

* *Pleading*: that is with concentration, with the whole of my being. Careless, unthinking, routine prayers are powerless. One has to be involved in an intensely personal exchange with God.

* *Persevering*, that is, on all occasions. Persistent prayer - not emergency appeals now and then when things go wrong. Whoever does not persevere in prayer every day should not resort to it in danger. Prayer: the most important source of our gratitude! Prayer is not dealt with in the second part of the Heidelberg Catechism (dealing with our salvation) but in the third part (dealing with our gratitude to God). Prayer is therefore not merely a *means* (to salvation), but the *purpose* of prayer is to express gratitude to God.

* *Unselfish*. Paul asks us to pray for all believers. Our personal prayers so often degenerate into a wish list of all we think we need. In times such as the one we live in, we do tend to think only of our own safety and not of the safety of believers in Soweto and elsewhere, who might be in far greater danger than we are.

Paul also speaks of "keeping watch", being alert, which is an absolute necessity for any soldier. Prayer, the personal contact with the Lord, teaches one to be wide awake. It prevents one from falling into com-

placency, prepared for any unexpected onslaught from an unexpected source, prepared to meet evil wherever it presents itself - among your own people, in your own sinful heart.

3. Conclusion

The weapons which we have at our disposal are the very best and the newest in existence, because they are the weapons of an Almighty God. Our General is the greatest there has ever been: Jesus Christ, to Whom has been given all power in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). Should we then still fear?

Gideon attacked and vanquished a powerful enemy with only 300 men, strong in the knowledge that God was helping him.

David refused the heavy mail offered him by Saul and with almost bare hands beat the giant facing him, armed to the teeth. He fought not only with the sword but in the Name of the Lord (1 Samuel 17:45).

The Word of the Lord is very encouraging for the believer in the face of threats, danger and even death:

* "When evildoers close in on me to devour me, it is my enemies, my assailants, who stumble and fall. If an army should encamp against me, my heart would feel no fear" (Psalm 27:3).

* "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand close at hand, but you it shall not touch" (Psalm 91:7).

* "If God is on our side, who is against us?" (Romans 8:31b). Also look at the lovely verses which follow this.

* "The Lord is my Helper, I will not fear; what can men do to me?" (Hebrews 13:6b).

* "Do not be afraid of the suffering to come. Only be faithful till death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

Chapter 18

AN OLD PERSON'S PRAYER

(Psalm 71)

"Now that I am old and my hair is gray, do not abandon me, O God!"

There are many things that an old man/woman cannot do any more. Some cannot walk any longer, others cannot even sit any more. But even if they are confined to a sickbed, there is one thing that they can still do: they can still pray. But even if old people are still strong and healthy, prayer should more and more characterize their lives. The closer one comes to the house of the Father, the more intense should be your interaction with Him.

What is more important than what I have to say about this moving prayer, is the prayer itself. Read it before continuing.

Structure

From the different ways of dividing this poem, we choose one which divides it into three main sections: verses 1-8; 9-17 and 18-24.

Each of these three main sections consists of three main elements: lament, trust and gratitude. In verses 1-4, 9-12 and verse 18 the poet expresses his *distress*. In verses 5-7, 14 and 19-21 he expresses his firm *trust* in God. And in verses 8, 15-17 and 22-24 each of the sections culminates in a *hymn of praise* about the fidelity of the Lord. (As you will see later, this is only a rough division. The transitions cannot always be given according to verses, but often occur *within* the same verse.)

Let us look in more detail at each of the three main sections, each with its three sub-divisions.

The golden thread

To prevent our becoming entangled in detailed analysis, let us make a few general remarks first.

Exegetes in general agree that it is an old man talking here. In the second place the poet is feeling depressed - as older people so often become. In the third place he is in great distress and addresses God about this. In the fourth place the remarkable thing is that the lament is not the most important part of the Psalm. The golden thread running through the whole hymn is his trust in God. Or better: God's unshaken fidelity towards him. In the final instance it is striking (as already mentioned) that each of the three main sections culminate in praise. The psalmist sees the uninterrupted hymn to God as the real, actual purpose of his life. The deepest fulfilment of his existence lies in his wanting to praise God.

In this there is a clear message for us. Doesn't lamenting your condition often rule your life? What has become of rock-fast trust in faith? Is your life mainly focused on singing the glory of God? The most important part of a prayer, after all, is not what we *ask* of God, but the glory that we *sing and bring* to Him.

The first main section (verses 1 - 8)

The very first verse speaks of firm trust: "Lord, I have come to you for protection". Whoever addresses God so directly and with such trust starts out well. The core of faith (and prayers in faith) is, after all, a firm trust. In the midst of many problems, dangers and distresses distracting his attention, the aged poet does not forget to focus on God. He knows that it is the only Person who is worthy of being trusted, Who will never disappoint one.

This is followed by the one plea after the other: save me! free me! listen to me! help me! The Lord has to be a refuge to him to which he can flee and be safe. In spite of the basic trust we see the tension in his faith in the paradoxical way in which he states it: "Be my secure shelter and a strong fortress ... you are my refuge and defence". This makes us think of the New Testament (just in inverted order): "I believe, O Lord ... support me in my lack of faith..."

In the subsequent verses we hear why the poet is in such great distress. Apart from the distress of old age he also has to endure attacks by the godless, criminals and oppressors. We will hear more about these people later.

In verses 5 and 6 the firm faith comes through, however. Note the intimately personal tone: "You are *my* help"; "You are *my* refuge". The Lord is not simply a help and a refuge, but a personal one. Is this true of your life too?

In these verses the Psalmist looks back - in the typical mode of the old person - to his past, and this gives him renewed hope for the present. Why? Because it is not he but God who is most important in his life. It is in God that he has trusted from youth onwards. But he goes back even further. God has helped him since birth (in those days birth was often hazardous). No, even more. Even before his birth, when he was still a helpless little bundle inside his mother, God was his Protector.

The poet does not provide his full biography, but he sums up his life history by saying that for many people he is a sheer miracle in terms of the many dangers that he has survived. And the secret of the survival of this man is the God of Miracles.

If you keep yourself involved with the past (the things that you can remember so well), what do you notice? Do you see only yourself in the power of your life, and all the things that you have achieved? Can this offer you any courage for the present? Or do you draw strength from a life history because it is full of the wonderful deeds of God, because He - and not you, yourself - is the most important figure in your biography?

From this Psalm we also see how important it is to think of the Creator in the days of your youth. If our aged Psalmist had not known God from early on, how much poorer would he not have been. He can now harvest that which he has sown for fifty years and more.

Verse 8 closes the first main section when the poet says: "All day long I praise you and proclaim your glory...". We have already said that this is the essence of life for him. Not *my* distress, not even *my* trust in God, but *your* glory is what is important. And not only in the peak times of life, or in the prime of our lives, but even *while* the poet is experiencing distress, even

when he is at an advanced age. For that reason: "All day long I praise you ...".

Are you also such a joyful old person - even in the midst of a lot of morbid and complaining old people? Joy in the Lord can change your life completely ...

The second main section (verses 9 - 17)

Verses 9 to 12 describe the distress in which the poet finds himself and about which he is praying to God in more detail. In the first verse he pleads with God not to reject him now that he has grown old. He is not so much worried about what his enemies can do to him now, but he fears rejection. And what old person does not fear exactly that? If you have become old, you so easily feel worthless - like a car in the scrap-yard, a used article on the rubbish dump. And many young people do in fact think that old people are simply a nuisance, useless within society. It is already critical when you are rejected by people, but catastrophic when God also rejects you. It was the greatest and most moving of Christ's suffering when He had to call out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?".

"Do not abandon me now that I am feeble" the psalmist goes on. This is also a typical fear of the aged: to lose one after the other (brother, sister, friends and spouse) and to be oppressed by loneliness among other old people. And this while your strength is giving out and you need the help of others.

In verses 10 and 11 the poet tells us what the enemy that he has already mentioned in verse 4 is doing. They see that he is helpless and he has nobody to help him. For that reason they conspire against him and pursue him to kill him. (Some exegetes are of the opinion that David is referring here to his own son Absalom and his co-conspirators.) The poet doubts whether God will help him in old age too and now his enemies are also mocking him and saying that his God has rejected him. Mockery hurts anybody, but especially a poor and helpless aged person. Mockery of God's fidelity is more horrible, however.

For that reason he not only entreats God to come to his aid soon (verse 12) but especially that those who have accused him so falsely and sought his downfall should themselves fall in misery and disgrace (verse 13). And

if you read the ending of the Psalm (verse 24) you will see that that is exactly what happened: his opponents could not only achieve nothing, but they fell into misery themselves. It is the foundation of the Psalmist's faith in God which is in contention here. He prays that his trust in God, his relationship with Him, will outlast the test.

In verses 14 and 15 trust breaks through like a bright ray of sunshine through dark storm clouds.

"I will always put my hope in you" - already in verse 5 he had confessed "Lord, I put my hope in you ...". He repeats this because hope is so important to man's life, especially the life of the aged. Hope and trust touch the core of one's existence. "Man becomes that which he hopes" Plato said, and we also believe that hope engenders life. If there is no hope any longer, there is no more reason to live any longer. Hope therefore has to do with the profoundest essence of our lives. Hope gives strength, while despair paralyses.

There is both true hope and false hope. In false hope the source and content are false, however. The source is man, and he directs his hope at something in creation. True hope, however, is indestructible. Why? Because the triune God Himself is the origin and the content of true hope. The origin does not lie in the hoping individual (like somebody throwing an anchor inside the boat and not outside the boat), and the content is not the future which he can try to create for himself.

Romans 15:13; 2 Corinthians 1:10; 1 Timothy 1:1, 10 and 1 Peter 1:3, 4 all state that God alone is our hope. And Romans 5:13 and Galatians 5:5 say expressly that the origin of our hope should be sought in the work of the Holy Spirit.

As an anchor holds a ship in the stormy sea, so true hope offers the psalmist security, rest and tranquillity. It is no wonder that the first Christians, during the persecution, chose the anchor as one of their symbols. Hope also offers protection like a helmet (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:8), because it offers sense, meaning, purpose, direction and a firm course to one's life. But hope also, according to Scripture, offers certainty, perseverance, joy, peace and rejoicing. We also see in this Psalm that somebody who hopes is a joyful person. Somebody once said that hope is like the birds (to whom you often listen in the early morning when you can't sleep any more): even

though it is still dark they already begin singing because they know without doubt that daybreak is near!

Do you now see why it is so important that the poet should say: "I will *always* put my hope in you ..."

Romans 15:13 is also my prayer to you, dear brother and sister: "May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit."

You will now understand why the second part of verse 14 already reads: "I will praise you more and more". Whoever has hope can praise. In the same verse the poet therefore goes on to praise, the third facet of this second main section of the Psalm.

Note here (and elsewhere in other places in the Psalm) that the promise to praise God is not only valid for a moment. It is accompanied by words such as *always*, *all day long* - the whole of our lives should be a song of praise to our God.

It also emerges that one should not only bring praise to the Lord through singing, but in many other ways too. A part of his praise is that he will keep on speaking about the Lord, keep on talking about the salvational work and deeds of God, which have been so numerous in his life that he cannot count them.

In this regard too this old man is an example to us. Old people like talking. But what do they discuss? Are their words only testimony of their own spiritual poverty, or testimony about the powerful deeds of God? If you look closely, you will see the footsteps of God in your life. And by testifying about them, you strengthen not only your own faith, but that of others.

The third main section (verses 18 - 24)

This third section also contains the three stages of prayer in distress, utterance of faith and final praise to the glory of God. Does this not sum up the essence of the Christian faith? (The *Heidelberg Catechism* also sums up everything in terms of misery, salvation and gratitude.)

For a second time the poet prays to God about his age. Even if he has been forsaken by everybody, God should not forsake him in his gray old age.

Note, however, what the motive is for the prayer. It is not a selfish, egotistic prayer about himself - as our prayers so often are. He asks the Lord to spare him because he wishes to pass on a legacy to the younger generation. Is he talking about money or possessions? No - his legacy is of things that cannot be destroyed. He wants to *tell* - tell about the work and power of the Lord, of the wonderful things that the Lord has done in his life. He was not exempt from danger and fear, as no child of the Lord is. Yet each time his life was saved, even from the jaws of death. Death: that which you have come so close to.

You might have noticed that only the first part of verse 18 dealt with the poet's distress. Already from the second part of the verse (until verse 21) his faith emerges. Once again it is his personal life history which strengthens him in his faith. He uses history correctly. He is not concerned only about the *past as past*, but also with its meaning for *today*. And in this section also with its meaning for *tomorrow*. Because he wants it to have meaning for the future generations too. They should be able to say, with him, in reverent prayer, "There is no one like you, O Lord" (verse 19).

This brings us to the third sub-section (22-24) of the third main section of this beautiful psalm, this intimate discussion between an aged man and his God - the final hymn of praise. Twice already he has praised the Lord. This third time brings us to the climax, however. It is as if the psalmist wishes to utilize everything that he has at his disposal to give volume and beauty to his hymn of praise. First musical instruments (the harp and the lyre). But then he wants to make this even more personal (his own lips and his tongue). His whole being has to be a prayer of thanksgiving to God - this is after all why we are here!

Once again the poet repeats his promise that he will continue all day long to sing and talk about the glory of God's faith, which is so great. Why are we so shy about sharing with others that which the Lord has done for us?

The theme of his closing hymn is therefore that which he had doubted three times: God's fidelity. He was so afraid that God would forget and

forsake him - would be untrue - in his old age. Yet it is confirmed three times that God never breaks his Word.

One involuntarily thinks of the grey Paul in prison. He too writes his will, he leaves his spiritual legacy to his spiritual child, Timothy. He tells him how wonderfully God has led and protected him. He too has the firm trust "... because I know whom I have trusted ..." (2 Timothy 1:12). He sings his swansong (2 Timothy 4:6) but can say with absolute certainty "... I have run the full distance, I have kept the faith ... and now there is waiting for me the prize of victory awarded for a righteous life ..." (verses 7,8).

Dear aged co-pilgrim, your life can - no, *must* - also become a song of praise. The Creator made us to sing his praises. This is the essence of our existence. Here on the old earth - where people become old too - we do not realize it every day. On the new earth it will be different, however. There (read Revelation 14:1-5 and 19:1-6) the uninterrupted hymn of "Praise the Lord" will be our most important task at the throne of the Lord.

You are old, but you are already on the threshold of the new earth. If you do not begin practising now, you might feel very uncomfortable in the mighty choir of the one hundred and forty-four thousand ...

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

Chapter 19

CHRIST'S GUIDELINES FOR HIS FIRST MISSIONARIES

Fourteen characteristics of a true missionary

(Matthew 10)

We all know the mission commandment in Matthew 28:18-20. Acts 1:8 is not unknown to us either. We should not forget, however, that on two other occasions, at least, Christ also sent out his disciples. We read of the sending of the twelve in Matthew 10, while Luke 10:1-20 tells of the sending of the seventy-two.

It is important for us to know what the guidelines had been which the Sender had given to the very first missionaries. We take Matthew 10 as the starting point, and read it verse by verse while ideas from Luke 10 are added where necessary. We can clearly deduce from these two chapters what a true missionary should look like, what characteristics he has to reveal in order to comply with the norms for mission work set by Christ.

I deduce the following features. (I mention them very briefly, the idea being that they can be fleshed out in the discussion.)

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. One of the least | 8. Careful but sincere |
| 2. Human | 9. Willing to die |
| 3. Dependent | 10. Convinced |
| 4. Purposeful | 11. Persevering |
| 5. Generous | 12. Free of worry and fear |
| 6. Mobile | 13. Humble |
| 7. Authoritative | 14. With rejoicing |

1. One of the least (Matthew 9:36; Luke 10:2)

In both Matthew and Luke Christ says that the harvest is plentiful but the workers few. It is still true today - you will be able to testify to this from the experience in your own congregation. The fact that those who obey the mission command are never numerous often causes one to feel desper-

ate. How can a few people (often not even 12, and definitely not 72!) give expression to this command? Scripture and history, however, are full of examples of Gideon's bands who have done great things. God is not interested in numbers, and we also need not be overly concerned with numbers. This does not mean, of course, that we (as Christ commands us) need not pray for more missionaries any longer.

2. Human (Matthew 10:2-4)

The twelve were also simply people like you and me: Peter, the big-mouth, James and John, sons of thunder, Thomas, the doubter, Simon the fanatic, the zealot, Judas Iscariot, the traitor... But in spite of their deficiencies Christ sends them out, just as He does with us. Each of them is important for Him. He does not simply send any twelve men at will, but twelve people whom He knows, through and through. Is it not encouraging that Christ does not choose the learned Pharisees and the rabbis as his envoys, but ordinary fishermen - to make them the envoys of his kingdom?

3. Dependent (Luke 10:1)

It is interesting to note that Luke says that the seventy-two were sent out two by two, and not on their own. There are things in which man should not be alone: in marriage and in being a Christian. In the field of mission work, too, one should not try and do this alone - and God does not expect that. It is said today that "the medium is the message". People also have to be convinced of the gospel of love by the way in which the carriers of the gospel interact lovingly.

4. Purposefully (Matthew 10:5-6; Luke 10:4, 7)

Christ sends these first disciples to their own people. It is only later (cf. Matthew 28:19 and Acts 1:8) that they are sent to all the nations, to all the reaches of the world. They are not supposed now to turn to the heathens or the Samaritans, and there is no time to lose. They should not unnecessarily shift from one host to the other, and should not even waste time with excessive greetings.

Do we still know this haste and this purposefulness in our own mission work? Just one example: When we go to specific people as part of this work, are we really equipped for it? Do we, for example, know their mother tongue? Do we know their customs and circumstances, so that we can

preach the gospel in a relevant manner? (The proclamation of the message of hope to the rich White businessman must be different from that to the poor Black farmworker.)

Another thought: Are we perhaps doing "mission work" where other churches have done it before us? Do we really have a mission strategy to reach those who have not been reached before? What is the relationship between our mission work and the already existing congregations and other church denominations?

5. Generous (Matthew 10:8)

"You received this freely, also give it freely", Jesus said of the special gifts which He gave his disciples to heal the sick, purify the lepers, drive out demons and resurrect the dead. They do these things in confirmation of their message that God's kingdom has come.

How often do we not think that mission work is preaching the Word only. Our dissemination of the message through deeds (for example, better teaching facilities, medical clinics, diaconal aid to the poor and the unemployed in our present financial recession) is also an integrative part of our mission task. We have not simply received the good news free of charge in order to pass it on - but God also blesses us materially out of his grace. Our often tightly closed wallets are simply not in accordance with "received freely, to be given freely".

Mission work means not looking the other way when facing misery, consoling people by promising a better future in the hereafter. True mission work means being involved *in* the misery and poverty and suffering and to be *one* with the sufferers. This is surely what Christ expected of the disciples when He sent them out to heal the sick and purify the lepers. It is only when we - mostly the prosperous sending churches - are willing to become one with the suffering that we have any hope that they will believe our words.

6. Mobile (Matthew 10:9; Luke 10:4)

A purse (gold, silver or copper), a travel bag, extra clothes, shoes or a walking stick are unnecessary burdens. A missionary travels light - he has

only one purpose, and that is to preach the Word, and to substantiate his message through his deeds, to say that the kingdom of God is at hand (Matthew 10:7).

Do we still realize this today, or has our prosperity become like weights attached to our feet? This is true not only in economic terms but also in terms of our ecclesiastical structures.

7. Authoritative (Matthew 10:1, 12-15, 19-20, 40; Luke 10:12-16)

Christ's envoys have authority. He who said "To me was given all power in heaven and on earth" has sent them. He also gives his envoys the power to perform miracles (verse 1) as signs to confirm that the kingdom so long awaited by the Jews has come. They can therefore grant *shalom* to those who receive them - or withhold it from those who do not. They even receive the right to shake the dust from their feet if they leave a town or a house unwilling to listen to them, and the judgment of God will rest on such a place. If they have to defend themselves to a governor or a king, and they do not know what to say, the Holy Spirit will speak on their behalf. Recapitulated: "Whoever listens to you, listens to Me ..." and "Whoever rejects you also rejects Me ...".

Do we still live today in the full realization that we are Christ's legitimate envoys? Do we still hesitate under the tremendous responsibility which rests on our shoulders? Do we speak with authority, or are we rather hesitant and willing to compromise the gospel?

8. Careful but sincere (Matthew 10:16)

Carefulness and sincerity are just as essential as the two feet the missionary needs, because "I am sending you like lambs among wolves". Many people - those who have not yet tried it - see missionary work as something ever so romantic, but it is instead hard and dangerous work. The devil cannot easily tolerate the gospel preaching liberation from his evil powers, and this becoming a reality in the lives of people. He incites the unbelievers to make it very hard for the envoys of Christ, and Christ's messengers are often as vulnerable as sheep among ravenous wolves.

A snake is wary of danger, and if not attacked, it will usually slink away. Missionaries also should not endanger themselves unnecessarily, but taking care does not mean doubting or cowardice.

Doves are vulnerable birds, and yet they fly past us, they perch on our roofs, and nest in our gardens. Even though missionaries might be as sheep among wolves, they will not only disarm through their utter sincerity, but also win others for the gospel. Somebody who is not utterly sincere will not qualify to become a missionary. If a person does mission work with all kinds of ulterior motives, as often has been the case in the past, then it is wasted effort. Nobody believes a hypocrite.

9. Willing to die (Matthew 10:17, 18, 21, 22)

Exactly how dangerous mission work can be, Christ clearly spells out when He says that they will be hated, delivered to the enemies, betrayed and whipped and even killed - by their own brother, child or father. The message that is borne by missionaries is a message of peace, but because of sin it brings division among those who believe and those who do not believe. It is striking to note that the greater part of this chapter (Matthew 10) deals with this. D. Bonhoeffer rightly said that if Christ invites you to be his disciple, He is inviting you to die.

In the history of our own country too there are examples of people who hated the missionaries. And just across the border in Angola and Mocambique there are Christian witnesses who are being tortured for the sake of their faith, and who have to bear the final testimony of dying for their faith. Our Coloured and Black brothers and sisters are beginning to experience the same when unrest breaks out in this country. Are we still truly willing to lay down our lives for Him if He should demand it?

10. Convinced (Matthew 10:17, 18, 32, 33)

One can only be willing to become a martyr if one is utterly convinced of what one is doing. Somebody who is convinced is also convincing - even in the face of governors and kings. "If anyone declares publicly that he belongs to me, I will do the same for him before my Father in heaven. But if anyone rejects me publicly, I will reject him before my Father in heaven".

Are we still convinced witnesses? Do we still have the courage of our convictions to remonstrate with White farmers who are paying their la-

bourers a starvation wage of R50,00 a month - because it is a sinful practice? Do we have the courage to remonstrate with those in high places that apartheid is a sin or that leaders who enrich themselves at the expense of their subjects will be punished by God?

11. Persevering (Matthew 10:21)

You will be able to confirm from personal experience that somebody who is not patient cannot be a missionary. Earlier missionaries often had to labour for years before they could show one convert. And often people whom you had considered truly reborn simply relapsed into the old and sinful ways. In this work one cannot think in terms of quick results. The devil has become so truly ingrafted in people's hearts that it takes a great deal of very patient work to dislodge him.

Mission work is not becoming easier in South Africa - it is rather becoming harder. Black people at times do not wish to hear anything about mission work by Whites because they see it as a further incidence of subtle condescension. Many Blacks regard God as the God of the Whites. If a Christian is the kind of person exemplified by many ostensible White Christians, then they would prefer not to be one ... Under such circumstances one needs a great deal of wisdom and patience.

Christ also says to his disciples that they should not give up hope if they are persecuted in one town. Simply flee to the next one. Just as in the case of being willing to testify, He offers a promise: whoever perseveres to the end, will be saved.

12. Free of worry and of fear (Matthew 10:19, 20, 26-30, 39 ; Luke 10:19)

Is it not wonderful: Worry and fear, which make life on earth so tense and unpleasant, need not plague the envoys of Christ - even though they are hated and might be whipped and killed. They need not worry about what they will say in the face of the power-wielders. They need not be afraid of people. God, Who even protects the sparrows and Who counts the hair on our heads, will keep us safe in his hands.

Christ gives us the power to step on snakes and scorpions and to vanquish our enemies without suffering. Do we still see this trust in ourselves today?

Christ does not offer us a guarantee that we won't be harmed or that our lives will always be safe. The glorious part of this is that even if I should lose my life, I will still be a winner. "Whoever tries to gain his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it". The King of kings stands by his envoys personally, even through the valley of death ...

13. Humble (Matthew 10:24, 25)

In these verses Christ wishes to direct our attention to the fact that we should not be surprised at having to endure mockery and persecution. (Elsewhere in the Bible He says that we should rejoice at it, because that shows that we are his children.) He, God's Envoy to the world, also experienced this. And we are not greater than Him. Although his disciples are clothed with power and authority, they should never elevate themselves.

We also should not think that we are better than the people to whom we are bringing the gospel. We are also only beggars who are telling our fellow beggars where to find the Bread!

If we succeed with our mission work, we also should not ascribe the success to ourselves. We can sow and water the plants, but God alone can create a harvest.

14. With rejoicing (Luke 10:17)

Are you surprised to hear that a missionary should be a joyful person, somebody with a song in his heart? We read this of the seventy-two and the joy with which they returned. And this is true of so many other witnesses of Christ who are mentioned in the Bible and in ecclesiastical history. They sing when prisoners, as martyrs they walk to the stake or the gallows with a song on their lips.

We need not bring nearly such exacting sacrifices. But: are we still willing on Saturday evenings to relinquish our TV programmes, or to get up early on Sunday mornings to prepare a catechism class or a sermon, or to sacrifice our Sunday afternoon nap - with a song in our hearts?

I think - and this is my closing thought - that the deepest secret of a missionary (and any Christian) should be gratitude. Only a grateful person can have this song in his heart. It is only when our cups run over with

gratitude for what Christ has done for us that we can also be glad if He wants to use us to take the good news of redemption to others as well.

Chapter 20

"AND HE CONTINUED HIS WAY WITH JOY ..."

The first Christian from Africa

(Acts 8: 26-39)

The rocky, lonely road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza lies sweltering in the Eastern sun. This is the caravan route from Damascus and Antioch leading to the fertile Nile valley.

It is midday, the hottest part of the day, when the route is usually deserted because travellers try to avoid the heat.

To our surprise we see a cloud of dust in the distance. When it approaches, we note that it is the travelling conveyance of an important, wealthy person, because he is travelling with a large retinue.

Who is the lonely traveller who is daring to travel during the scorching heat in this wilderness of chalky hills and scorched plants? What is the purpose of his journey?

A quest for the true God

He is in fact an important man - he is the Minister of Finance of the Queen of Ethiopia.

According to Scriptural exegetes "Ethiopia" does not refer to the present Ethiopia (earlier called Abyssinia) but rather to the present-day Sudan. At the time referred to, however, the frontiers were not the same, and were not so clearly drawn either. In any event, this man is an African. (It is interesting also to read in the Old Testament - Jeremiah 3 verses 7-13 - of an Ethiopian and a eunuch.) The region from which he came was seen in those times as belonging to the outer limits of the known world.

This was perhaps the reason why this travelling company kept on travelling even in the heat of midday. If the Ethiopian had travelled from Jerusalem to the present capital, Addis Abeba, the distance, as the crow flies, would

be no less than 2 800 kilometers - and by road at least 3 000. It could therefore easily have taken him a month to reach his destination by wagon. The Ethiopian queen had also possibly not given her minister unlimited leave of absence, so it was imperative for him to keep moving.

But what had brought the African to Jerusalem? The Bible says that he went there to worship. He therefore knew about the God of Israel. It is not impossible that he should have had contact with the Jews. There were many Jews in Egypt then, and Jewish traders travelled the whole of the known world. As an intelligent man he could not find peace with the religion of his own country. He had the instinct that Yahweh was the true God, who could really give man peace. The heart of this questing man could not find peace. He *had* to travel to the holy city of Jerusalem to find out more. The day then dawned on which he submitted the request to his queen for permission to undertake the long and arduous and possibly dangerous journey abroad.

Following the pilgrimage his heart must have found peace.

Disappointed in the Jewish religion

Between the lines, however, we have to make the assumption that this was not the case. From the Pharisees and the Scholars, with their rigid legalism, he could derive nothing of the joy that he thought greater knowledge of God should offer man. His disappointment was even greater, however, because in view of the fact that he was a eunuch the Jews would not even allow him to make a sacrifice to God (cf. Leviticus 21:20). And what is more, he was even forbidden simple entry to the Temple of Yahweh (cf. Deuteronomy 23:1).

The church of the day could bring no light to him. More: because of their "apartheid" they had no room for this African.

The man in the wagon on the lonely desert road is therefore a deeply disappointed man ...

The role of the written word

The Holy Spirit, who had evoked the great longing in the heart of this man, does not let go of its work, however. This man keeps searching - not in a great city any longer, but in a scroll.

He probably got hold of the whole or a section of the book Isaiah in Jerusalem. It was rare in those times to possess something like that, because such manuscripts were rare and very expensive. Now, in a last, desperate effort he seeks light in a prophecy 500 years old. In that book, the prophet consoles his people who are in exile - there is hope for the future.

But for the African this remains a closed book. He does not understand what he is reading. He has many questions and no answers.

God will see to it, however, that this questing man finds Him...

God uses people to open his Word for other people

When we look again, we see someone travelling on foot along the same road. What would the man be doing there? Who could it be? Is it not the deacon Philip, from the first Christian congregation? Yes, he had received a command from an angel of the Lord to go, at this specific time, to this specific road (there were two roads from Jerusalem to the south). When Philip caught sight of the wagon, the Holy Spirit told him that he had to go and walk next to this wagon.

When Philip reached the wagon, out of breath, he heard, to his great surprise, that the person on the wagon was reading in Greek - and, moreover, reading a very well-known section from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). It was, without doubt, the well-known Isaiah 53 verses 7 to 8, in which the prophet predicts the suffering and death of Christ.

Philip now knew that the Lord had not let him come to this wagon in vain. He found the confidence to speak to the high official from Ethiopia: "Do you understand what you are reading?"

"How could I, if somebody did not explain it to me?", the disappointed Black man answered. And because he felt intuitively that this stranger could help him, he invited him to tell him whether the prophet was talking about himself or somebody else.

Of course Isaiah was not talking about himself, but about Somebody else, about the Person the African had been seeking. Philip therefore began

with this section of Scripture and indicated how, 500 years later, it would be realised in the life, suffering and death of Christ. He also told him how man could find true peace in God through faith in the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Philip also told him that it was baptism which sealed this faith. The more he explained the gospel, the greater the excitement of the Ethiopian. His face became animated, he was seeing the light!

The gospel also for an African and even a eunuch?

And yet there was heartbreak deep in his dark eyes. "This is a glorious gospel, but unfortunately it cannot be my lot ..."

"But why?" Philip asked.

"In the first place I am not a Jew. And in the second place I am a eunuch. For that reason I could not enter the Temple or offer a sacrifice to your God in Jerusalem."

Philip took the scroll from the hand of the Ethiopian, and in chapter 56 verse 3 he read: "Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the Lord, speak, saying, the Lord hath utterly separated me from his people, neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree". He read up to verse 7. Wonderful words! The thirsty spirit of the Ethiopian soaked up the words. His fear and heartbreak disappeared. A deep peace suffused his face.

The most important thing in the new dispensation is therefore not who you are (a Jew or an African, somebody with a damaged sex organ or without any bodily defects), but whether you live according to the command of the Lord. The old dispensation had passed. Even in the Temple - which the Ethiopian could not enter - the name of the believing eunuch would find a place of honour. And his sacrifices would find favour in the eyes of the Lord. For "mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people" (conclusion of verse 7).

Joy for the first Christian from Africa

What the prophet predicted in verse 7 ("I will make them joyful in my house of prayer ...") happened to this man from Ethiopia. He suddenly saw light. He was not filled with questions any longer but with joy. The formerly closed

Word had, through Philip's explication, suddenly become a living Word to Him. The joy of redemption had suddenly suffused his whole being and shone in his eyes.

We are not surprised to hear of the desire of this man from Ethiopia to be baptised there and then, on the road.

In this way this man became the first convert from Africa of which Scripture talks. As a heathen (or at most a sympathiser with the Jewish faith) he had left his country, and he returned to it as a Christian. Psalm 68 verse 31 had been fulfilled: "...Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God".

At the beginning we had seen this man sunk in doubt and disappointment. For that reason the contrast is so much greater, for "he continued on his way with joy ...". There is a remarkable *because* in the original text "When they emerged from the water, the Spirit took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, *because* he continued on his journey with joy". His joy in the Lord was so great, his joy about the redemption in Christ so intense, that he did not miss the instrument (Philip) when he disappeared. He was not alone on his journey any longer, because God was *with* him, Christ was *for* him and the Spirit was *in* him.

Once you find yourself with such joy, it is impossible to keep it to yourself. This African undoubtedly told of the gospel in his own country. (We also know of Christian missionaries who went to Ethiopia in the fourth century, and again of Protestant missionaries in the seventeenth century.) Whatever the situation, it remains true that a flourishing Christian church has existed in this country since early history.

For more than 1 600 years Ethiopia was a bastion of Christendom in the strategic eastern Horn of Africa - and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church still exists today. (For more details about the riveting history of this church, cf. J.P. Kealy and D.W. Shenk: *The Early Church in Africa*, Nairobi, Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 298-307.)

Little joy in Africa today

How do people in Africa today 2 000 years later, travel the lonely dust roads and busy streets of the great cities of this continent? Is there joy in the

hearts of the inhabitants of Addis Abeba, Nairobi, Accra, Lusaka, Harare and Soweto?

If we have to believe the newspapers, there are not many people today who continue their journeys of life with joy. Africa is regarded as a bleeding continent: corruption, nepotism, tribalism, racism, nationalism, poverty, famine, disease, poor health, high infant mortality, very high population increases, rural impoverishment, urbanization, unemployment, lack of good food and clean drinking water, malnutrition, an increase in cost of living, inflation, coup d'états, civil wars, persecution of Christians in many countries, the threat of Islam, the danger of syncretistic cults and secularism. Many people are still adherents of traditional religions and live in fear of witch doctors. Others have landed in the grip of alien ideologies such as the un-Christian one of Marxism.

The Lord, however, wants to use us, as He used Philip in days gone by, to help the people of Africa to journey through life with joy.

Chapter 21

JONAH AND US

Fleeing from God's transcultural command?

(Jonah 1-4)

In our reflection on the issue of "Cultural diversity: an embarrassment or an opportunity?" the book of Jonah has a clear message for us, even though it is a largely negative message: it indicates how we should *not* tackle the issue.

In this brief meditation, let us note the following three main points:

- * The *command* of God
- * The *flight* of Jonah
- * The *lesson* for us

1. The command of God

God sends his prophet to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the powerful Assyrian empire in the East. This wealthy city would have been about 1 000 years old in Jonah's time, with about 2 million inhabitants. A bustling centre, therefore, of science, art and culture. But on the inside it was decadent and rotten, full of evil...

Jonah had to go and preach against the sinfulness of the people of this great city, so that he could convert them, because the Lord does not seek the downfall of man, but wants men to live, especially people who have fallen so far that they cannot even distinguish between their left and their right hand any longer (4:11). He is even deeply concerned about the animals (4:11)!

The book of Jonah clearly indicates that God is not only the God of the nation Israel. With his command to Jonah He broke through the particularism and the nationalism of the Jews. This missionary book on a small scale predicts what would be described on a much larger scale in the Acts of the Apostles.

A command, therefore, aimed at transcultural communication and evangelization, an immensely important command, and a great privilege to be sent by God Himself. We expect of Jonah to obey his Sender immediately.

We do not know Jonah yet, however. He was still living in the high conjuncture of prosperity under King Jeroboam II, the most powerful monarch who ever ruled the ten tribes of Israel. He liked to transmit pleasant messages to the king (cf. 2 Kings 14:25), but was probably averse to prophesizing *against* kings and men, because we do not read anywhere that - like his colleagues Amos and Hosea - he spoke of judgment on the sins of Jeroboam and the nation. He was thus a *spoilt prophet*, somebody who liked to float with the stream and not note the sins of his own people.

This was not all. For Jonah the nation of Israel was the only elected nation, and perhaps he dreamed often of the position of power which this nation would still assume with regard to all other nations. In spite of their unrighteousness and lack of faith he still believed that God would not destroy them (Cf. what Amos prophesized in 9:8-10.) Thus, he is a fanatic *nationalist*.

But someone with these traits is also a *frightened prophet*. And a frightened prophet is also an *uncommunicative, quiet prophet*. Finally he becomes a *fleeing prophet!*

2. Jonah's flight

There might be many reasons why Jonah fled from his calling. He could have been reluctant about travelling to such a far country and to communicate with people speaking a foreign language. It could have been dangerous to point out people's sins to them and to preach to them about a new God.

But the actual reason lay in the fact that Assyria was Israel's enemy number one. Jonah therefore had no objection about the Lord being wrathful about the Ninevites and threatening to destroy them. If he fulfilled God's command and the Assyrians converted and lived instead of dying, he could be branded as a national traitor when he returned. And Jonah made the wrong choice. The prophet, who should have known better, truly thought that he could flee from God - the sheerest folly!

He tried to flee in *three* ways, but never succeeded: Towards the West, into *sleep* and in *death*.

He should have gone to the East, but fled westwards. As far as possible. Tarshish, a city in southwest Spain practically lay on the edge of the known world. But it did not matter how far he fled, how much it cost, as long as he could duck the command of God!

But ... God sent a storm to stop Jonah.

He was supposed to be a wide-awake prophet, who had to tell everybody whom he encountered about the God of Israel. But he lay fast asleep in the hold of the boat. The other people in the boat worked hard, threw overboard the cargo, prayed, even if to their idols. But Jonah took refuge in sleep - he did not work and was even less inclined to prayer.

This time God sent the captain to wake him up. A heathen had to ask a believer what possessed him to sleep while other people were in danger of losing their lives. A heathen had to ask the prophet of God to pray! Jonah must have been very thick-skinned if he did not redden in shame. Perhaps Jonah did then pray. We don't know. It was not, in any event, a prayer of conversion. He would rather break than bow to the command of God. He also apparently did not worry that it was as a result of his disobedience that many lives were placed in jeopardy.

Therefore he had to be humiliated even further. The lot indicated him to be the guilty party. The prophet of God was arraigned before the justice of the heathen sailors: "What work do you do? Where do you come from? What nation are you?" Jonah gave the information that was demanded, and he also acknowledged to them that God was punishing him because he was trying to evade Him, but he still did not confess the sin of avoidance of his calling to God. Therefore the storm did not abate, but grew in intensity. The sailors tried their utmost, but finally they realized that Jonah would have to be thrown overboard - as he himself indicated to them. To his shame they prayed again - this time even to his God!

It is hard to determine whether Jonah preferred the watery death because of surrender or sustained opposition, piety or godlessness. Was it an act of sacrificial intent (to save the innocent) or simply suicide? Possibly it was a mixture of both. This does not take away the fact that also Jonah's third

attempt to flee was away from God. Jonah himself said later (4:3) that it was better for him to die than to live and to see how the Ninevites became converted and lived. Is this not terrible? Can one be such a hardened nationalist, so church obsessed, as to prefer to die rather than to see other nations share in God's blessing? Yes, that is possible. The spirit of Jonah is alive and well and living in South Africa ...

God, who had pursued Jonah, was ready to arrest him, however. First he obstructed him by means of the storm, then by means of a heathen captain, and then finally by a whale. We can never flee from God and his command - even though this command might be abhorrent to our deepest being.

Against his own will and desire Jonah now became a type of Christ (Matthew 12:39-41). He was inside the fish for three days and nights, as Christ was in the tomb. As Jonah (guilty and unwilling) had to die to save others, so Christ (innocent and yet willing) went forward to death to save us.

3. The lesson for us

Jonah is not an inspiring prophet at all. If we should, for example, compare his disgraceful actions during the storm with those of Paul in Acts 27 we realize that the fugitive from God also became a spineless weakling among men.

If we are willing to look at ourselves searchingly, however, we realize that we are blood relatives of Jonah. Christendom in South Africa is rife with images of Jonah:

- We are spoilt prophets
- We are nationalistic prophets
- We are silent prophets
- We are cowardly prophets
- We are fleeing prophets
- We are failed prophets.

God gave the command here, as He perhaps did not do in any other country in the world, that we should break through barriers of race, nation, language, culture and politics and carry the gospel to all men. Cultural

diversity should not be an embarrassment to us, but should rather be a wonderful opportunity.

And what do we do?

We flee from the opportunity.

We are afraid of each other.

For that reason we become so over-critical towards other people and their cultures that we do not see the good in them. We do not realize that God was also working in and through the traditional African cultures. It is often true that the devotion of their prayers to their gods can shame us - as it should also have been for Jonah. Their general religious devotion as manifested in all spheres of life is alien to us. Their common humanity, their intense fellow-feeling, is often an example to us.

On the obverse side of the coin many Black people see the culture of the Whites, the "oppressors", simply as a threatening entity which does not harbour any good.

Together with the over-critical attitude towards others there is an uncritical attitude towards one's own culture. One is not willing to look into one's own being and to see and acknowledge weaknesses. And even if one should see these weaknesses, one does not wish to talk about them, for who would like to be unpopular among his own people? Like Jonah it is easier to opt for popularity among one's own group - even if this should go directly against the will of God.

Many of the White people in this country still refuse to acknowledge that apartheid is a sin in the eyes of the Lord. And for as long as we wish to remain caught in our nationalistic ideology, instead of confessing our sins, the Lord will not, as in the case of Jonah, hear our prayers for South Africa.

We still do not realize sufficiently how we - as Jonah did in his own way - have helped many innocent people to land with us in a dangerous political tempest through the sinful practice of apartheid.

The true attitude should not be one of being over-critical towards others and uncritical of oneself, but rather one of being critical towards oneself and sympathetic towards that which one does not know.

Such an attitude would offer hope for South Africa's future, because if we hold such an attitude we acknowledge that no culture is either perfectly Christian or totally evil. In *each* culture there are good and bad things. In South Africa we now have the task of cherishing that which is good from each culture and building on that, but at the same time to root out the evil and the wrong and to dispose of it.

In this we, as Christians, should take the lead.

I often get the impression, however, that we as Christians worry as little about our transcultural mission as did Jonah. While we should be working and praying, we have fallen - like Jonah - into a stuporous sleep: a sleeping church in a tempest-torn South Africa!

As in the case of the heathen sailors "secular, worldly politicians" are often more worried about what is happening with us. As the heathen captain has to wake up Jonah, so non-believing, but sensitive, people have to wake us from our slumber and remind us of our responsibility to work and to pray. And just like Jonah among the heathen sailors we also find ourselves daily among many people who thirst for the true gospel of salvation, but we prefer to keep quiet and keep our distance. We are so ashamed of the Word. We are so afraid of fulfilling our calling as prophets *in all directions* ... And this while God has the solution to the most profound problems besetting our country.

God likes cultural diversity. On his new earth too. In the new Jerusalem the glory and the honour of *nations* are brought together in *one* city (Revelation 21: 24, 26). We should therefore see to it that the good from each culture in South Africa be readied for this day.

May this conference be like an almond tree in bloom or a returning swallow: A clear sign of a new spring in South Africa, because we have learnt here, as true believers, how one can deal *positively* with cultural diversity!

OUR SOCIO-POLITICAL CALLING

Chapter 22

OUR PRESENCE IN THE WORLD

(Matthew 5:13-16 and 13:33)

We have to acknowledge that Christ was different. He spoke with real authority. To my mind the wonder resides in the fact that He could point out the Way by using such simple images of everyday life. Let us study together the way which Christ pointed out how one should conduct one's involvement in the world as regards politics, society and religion.

Christ uses the following images:

Salt (Matthew 5:13)

Christ chose his images with the greatest care. Why should believers be compared with salt?

This image not only says something special about Christians. It also clarifies something about the world.

What the world looks like

It says of the world that it is in the process of becoming tasteless and rotten.

Is this not precisely what is happening today? Instead of a rising line - which should come in the wake of scientific, technological and economic developments - the world is on the road downwards. Mankind is steadily becoming more godless, barbarous, more cruel by the day. Creation, having become swamped by sin, is not able to pull itself, by its bootstraps, out of the mire of sin. Instead, we are in the process of sawing through the thin twig on which we are precariously sitting!

With the rottenness goes the tastelessness, the lack of savour. Life for most people has become without taste or savour. Look at the mania for pleasure that has made itself master of many people. But even this breathless quest for entertainment and for pleasure has not succeeded in taking away the

emptiness, bringing as it does at best a temporary anaesthesia of the senses.

The calling of the Christian

In opposition to this one could say that the Christian has both a negative and a positive task. He has to act against rottenness and he has to provide savour again, which is the most important functions we expect salt to have.

A Christian is not a negative person, but as a result of the fall into a state of sin, and the resulting process of putrefaction and degeneration, he cannot do other than to see his task in the first place as one of cleansing and preservation. Should meat not be salted, it cannot be preserved.

As Christ did not feel any shame in consorting with criminals and contemptible people, so also should his followers enter the putrefying world with a message of redemption and salvation.

Salt is not only an antiseptic. It is also a spice. The Christian should not only cleanse, he should also add savour.

To those who have lost all sense of savour in life, he has to restore it. He also has to teach them that those things making life worth living will give sense and meaning to life: these are not the mad quest for wealth, honour and pleasure, but real and loving service to God and one's neighbour.

The condition

It goes without saying that the Christian can only have this effect on the world if he goes *into* the world.

An ascetic rejection of the world, "the secular", is implicitly rejected by Christ in the image of the salt. One doesn't wrap the spoonful of salt in plastic before lowering it into the pot. Salt can't have any effect if it is not rubbed into the meat.

On the other hand one also has to remember that Christ did not have in mind the revolutionary destruction of the existing order when He used the image of the salt. The Christian is the salt - not the spirits of salt - in the world. Revolution is the method of the unbeliever. Should the Christian use

this method, it would mean that there is no difference between him and the unbelieving revolutionary.

In the world and yet different

This is the fundamental and underlying difference: In the world, but not of the world. The Christian enters the world, but he always retains his character of uniqueness.

Christ points this out when He warns: "But when the salt has lost its savour..." Salt in those days could not be bought in the finely refined form of today. The impure lumps of salt were apparently soaked in water until all the salt has been withdrawn and then the lumps were thrown away.

One task only

Salt that has lost its savour: that is salt that has lost its character, and its purpose. Other things do not become worthless when they cannot fulfil their primary function anymore. When a flower dies, one can still use it to make compost. When a tree cannot give shade anymore, it can be cut down for firewood or to make furniture of the wood. With salt it is different: when it has lost its savour it cannot be used for anything anymore. The only solution then is to get rid of it.

Christians in name only

The message for the believer is clear. Should he not have an effect on the world anymore, he is like salt that has become impotent. There were many of this sort of believers in the time of Christ. Savourless lumps of salt still look like real salt. At first glance it is still real salt. In reality, however, it is not salt anymore. Thus there are many Christians who still have the outward appearance of Christians, but who have lost all savour. Would Christ perhaps, in formulating this parable, have been thinking of the Pharisees? Should this also point at the many people today who are Christians in name only?

It is clear, in any case, that there is nothing in creation quite so worthless as those who are Christians in name only.

They know just enough of Christianity to spoil its impact. They do not know of any real message of joy. They are pathetic human beings. They are not real Christians, and they are not real people of the world - they are nothing. For this reason they are rejected by the world and by God alike.

A contradiction

Savourless salt is in itself a contradiction. The essential function of salt is to lend flavour and taste. To try and preserve salt is ridiculous. For us to preserve religion as a means to keep us good for heaven and satisfied with ourselves is patently ridiculous. Our task is not in *saving* ourselves, but rather in *giving* ourselves for the preservation of others. Should we let go our function of imparting savour to the world, we become less than what God expected of us. Should we wilfully withdraw from the world, we go against his plan with us.

The modus operandi

This wonderful parable also teaches us how to disseminate the word of God in the world.

Should the church do this by means of making statements at meetings on political, economic or cultural matters? Should all the *-isms* such as Communism, Capitalism, and others be combated in this way?

The reformatory way (as opposed to the revolutionary way) is the more difficult, because it is more radical, fundamental and individual. There are libraries full of statements on a multitude of evils and they bring us nowhere if we as individuals refuse our calling of lending savour to the world. It is not the general idea of salt, but each individual pinch applied where it is necessary which will work. It is this crystal of salt which will penetrate and pervade its surroundings and really be effective.

How does this beneficial effect take place? It is quiet, unnoticed, unobtrusive. It does not happen through a great noise made by international religious meetings or through the thunder of revolutionary violence. And yet something happens, unmistakably. The meat remains meat, and yet it is different. It has been preserved from putrefaction, it has been given savour.

The meat has not been thrown away. It has been saved from rotteness. Something new has been implanted which has preserved it and made it useful.

Christ does not deem the world useless or rotten and throw it away. According to the parable it is the hypocrites and the Christians in name that He disposes of, by allowing them to land in the outer darkness...

Light (Matthew 5:14-16)

Another very brief parable with important implications: "You are the light of the world". Once more the entire call to the believer is summed up in *one* pregnant sentence.

As in the previously explicated parable, this image does not only function on the explicit level. It also has much to say on the implicit level.

The condition of the world

The world has been thrown in darkness. It is a terrifying, pitchblack night. In spite of scientific and technological developments it would seem as if the world is going backwards rather than progressing. Of a real enlightenment, an Aufklärung, there is no sign. There are all sorts of breathtaking discoveries in the fields of science and technology, while at the same time fundamental problems of life are unsolved. One finds a brilliant scientist - and sees that he is unhappily married... One sees a great scholar - and finds that he has made a pathetic failure of his personal life...

Bearers of light

In this night of unbelief, the Christian shines forth like a light (Ephesians 5:8; Philippians 2:15; 1 Peter 2:9). he does not shine through his own strength - this is exactly the problem of so many so-called bringers of light who would generate their own light. That is nothing but a case of the devil parading in the guise of an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). Because God is Light (1 John 1:5), because Christ is Light (John 8:12, 9:5), we can also bring light. Our light is a reflected light, however - just as the moon has no light of itself and only reflects the light of the sun.

The effect

What does light do? In the first place it reveals the darkness as being darkness. People who are caught in the darkness do not after a while notice it any more. They think that it is normal. They get to love darkness. But when light is suddenly seen to blaze forth, they realize how very dark it had been, and how very poor they had really been.

The believer shed light on the cause of the darkness and he also lights the way out of the darkness.

Not many aristocrats, rich people or learned people

"You are the light - and only you..." Have you thought who Christ addressed with these words? He did not speak to the Sadducees, the clever Pharisees or the scribes. No, He spoke to illiterate fishermen, simple farmers, manual labourers, women, children... They were the only people who trod the right way in the midst of the profusion of wrong ways as trod by the Pharisees, the Zealots, the Essenes - who so loudly proclaimed their own ways. In the place of these simple people one should be able to put one's own name...

Not as a matter of course

Just as in the case of the previous parable there is also a big *but* here. Christ added to His call the additional one of: Let your light shine! This would seem to be redundant - one need not tell a light to shine, as it does it of its own accord.

The fact, however, that Christ does not stop at "You are the light of the world", but adds the further injunction, points to the fact that it does not happen automatically. Just as there is salt that cannot salt anymore, so can there be light that cannot shine anymore. One can then veritably speak of saltless salt and lightless light.

Worthless

As in the case of the previous parable, Christ would here also like to make clear just how ridiculous and fruitless it is for a Christian not to fulfil his fundamental function. Salt should salt. Light should shine forth. The

actions should be decisive. Should these actions disappear, it would cast grave contempt on the very nature of these things, as they would seem to be abjuring themselves.

A Must...

The actions of a man lighting a lamp and then hiding it under a bushel are patently ridiculous. Yet this is precisely the case with Christians who hide their light in the inner room, in the church or wherever. As a light fundamentally has it in its nature to shine, so should a Christian feel the inherent compulsion to shine and to give out his light. Asceticism is against the nature of the true Christian. With how many Christians is it not precisely the case that they either withdraw or disappear into the wilderness: they are sometimes still in the world but they do not disseminate any light or warmth. Essene flight or Pharisaic formal religion are both today very much alive. The Essenes locked their little light into their monasteries. The Pharisees sought to be the light of the world out of themselves.

The modus operandi

How should the believer be the light of the world? The parable even gives an answer as to the *how*.

Light functions quietly, tranquilly, peacefully. Christ does not say that the believer has to burn like a fire or a gas burner. Our method is not the method of the revolutionary arsonist but that of the bringer of brightness. Reformation does not mean burning or destruction but enlightenment.

Two directions

Where salt works under cover, light does the work more openly. While salt becomes impregnated in its surroundings, light works in the opposite fashion, by attracting. The city on the mount with the white houses in the bright sun does not remain hidden but attracts the traveller.

The order

It is striking that Christ should first say that we are salt and then that we are light. The order is very important.

The world first has to see that the Christian does something to the world, that he changes it in some way. This has to leave the world surprised and wondering. People will then be irresistibly drawn in order to determine what it is that is so different. Then will follow the word, the explanation: Our light is merely a reflection of *the* Light.

We are too often inclined to reverse the order: first the word and later (perhaps) the deed. We do not succeed, however, in attracting anybody with our deedless words. Wordless deeds are also insufficient. We have to reveal the secret behind our deeds to the world. (Mere developmental help without preaching of the gospel is not enough!) Christ deliberately spoke of salt *and* light, light *and* salt!

The most important

Our light has to shine in the world, so that people may perceive our good deeds. Is this not a call to a Pharasaical display of hypocrisy? No, because Christ continues with the injunction to glorify the name of the heavenly God. Our good works must be done in such a way that people who perceive them will not praise us but will look beyond us and glorify the name of the Father. They have to realize very clearly that we are not the light, but that we are merely reflections of the heavenly Light. There is no room here for personal aggrandizement and honour. It is only when we have as our only purpose to serve God and to bring glory to his Name that it will have the effect of letting people see through us and our deeds to perceive the shape of the Father behind all this.

Christ evocatively portrayed the task of the believer in many more parables. We will look very briefly at three more.

Yeast (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20)

Here Christ reflects on what happens when a small amount of yeast is kneaded into a large amount of flour (three measures). The contrast lies in the small beginning which assumes such great proportions when the tiny bit of yeast permeates and leavens its entire surroundings...

This is what happened in history. The gospels were not taken into the wide world by the rich, the aristocratic, the learned - rather they were disseminated by a small group of illiterate, simple fishermen (Acts 4:15; 1 Corin-

thians 1:26ff). Reformation, renewal in the history of the church, mostly did not occur through theological debates but simply in the process of people learning once again to read the Bible and its message.

One should thus not be contemptuous of the small things, for often they constitute the Way of God.

Unassuming, insignificant, small - but powerful: the yeast has the inherent, inborn power to alter its surroundings. Just as the flour cannot be turned into appetizing bread without the addition of yeast, so would we be useless tools in the hand of God were the Holy Spirit not to work on us. The power of the Holy Spirit is the power which enables small, insignificant little men and women to change the world. Just like salt and light it works quietly and unassumingly. In this way does the Kingdom come - with no outward pomp and splendour (Luke 17:20). Rebirth is not something that is accompanied by all sorts of impressive effects. It happens quietly, without being seen. The quiet working, however, does not mean that it is ineffective or that there are no results. The tasty bread that is the product is the clearest evidence!

Wine (Luke 5:37, 38)

In this instance too Christ describes the results of the process of fermentation. New wine poured into old skins will ferment and make them burst - with the loss of both skins and wine. In this instance even the explosive effect of the process of fermentation is mentioned.

Typical of the workings of an enzyme (derived from the Greek word *zyme* = yeast, fermentation), is that it works in something that is larger than itself. It promotes certain chemical processes within the mass in which it is placed. It functions as a catalyst which does not only precipitate the reaction but also maintains and speeds it up. It has the potential to change the entire mass of which at first it constitutes only a small part.

As was the case with the yeast leavening the bread, the process of fermentation in the wine is a hidden process. But it is inherently a process which has the power to change its surroundings (the grape juice) inevitably into wine. It is thus a very powerful though hidden process.

Two things have to be kept in mind, however:

* An enzyme is a *living* organism. For that reason it is able to change its surroundings. One should thus not expect any results from dead, lifeless Christians and churches. (Two contradictions in themselves, for a lifeless Christian is not a real Christian and a dead church is no real church.) A confession that is based only on outward form is a hollow sham. Paul has referred to such people as "having merely the form of godliness" (2 Timothy 3:5). Our faith should also be actively lived. With the heart one believes and with the mouth one confesses (Romans 10:9, 10). Orthodoxy (the true teaching) is good, but dead orthodoxy is one of the most dangerous things imaginable.

* The ferment, enzyme, the yeast, has to be *mixed* with its surrounding substances in order to release its power. As believers we should not think that we will attain anything on earth if we are not willing to mix with the world.

The church which thinks that it has to put the gospel into safe keeping in a freezer in order to shield it from the corrupting influence of the world is making a mistake. Such a church deteriorates into a club for the pious, a clique for those who pride themselves on being the respectable and the chosen, a sterile chamber for the cultivation of Pharasaic complacency. Such a church and such believers constitute an obstacle in the dissemination of the Gospel to all the nations and races. To such should one apply the parable of the bad servant who wrapped the talents entrusted to his care in cloths and hid them instead of using them to gain interest (Luke 19:12ff).

Seed (Matthew 13:31-32)

Seed first has to be put into the ground before it can be fruitful. Does this not say a great deal about the way in which we have to account for our lives upon this earth?

A mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds, and yet the tree that grows from a mustard seed grows to a height of up to three metres. The idea here is clearly that the eventual development is out of all proportion to the initial planting. In this way the Kingdom of God should also be viewed. Our presence in the world may seem insignificant and without substance. Yet God can, through his mercy, achieve a great deal, should we be willing to

be as nothing, as a mustard seed. Also, we should be willing to go into the dark earth and even to die...

Salt, yeast and wine: the *intensity* of our presence on earth. If the salt has not lost its savour, and the yeast has not gone flat, a handful of Christians can salt and leaven a place to such an extent that sinful habits may gradually be eliminated and a new and wholesome spirit come to permeate that community.

Light and a mustard seed: the *extent* of our presence. From a tiny flame the light grows and the darkness is driven away. The seed which germinated in only a few hearts begins to grow in others as well. Should the light not be obscured, and die of lack of oxygen, and the seed really grow, something has to happen. The city on the mount, the new Jerusalem, will exert an irresistible attraction...

Chapter 23

A PRAYER FOR GOVERNMENT TO GOVERN ACCORDING TO GOD'S WILL

(Psalm 72)

The role of the state - rulers and subjects - is at present being hotly debated in this country. Usually only the well-known bits of Scripture (such as, for example, Romans 13:1-7 and other New Testament sections) are trotted out in any reflection on this type of issue. We keep forgetting that in the Old Testament much material on this is found - even in the Psalms!

We may also not allow the emphasis to fall one-sidedly on the responsibility of the subjects (one facet of the state as a societal relation). The government too (the other facet of this relation) should have its actions tested against the Word of God. And Psalm 72 directs our attention to precisely this.

Not simply a prophecy of messianic rule

What can Psalm 72 teach us in this regard? Let us look at only two things: 1) the responsibility of the king (or ruler) and 2) the effects of government conducted according to the will of God.

Many exegetes say that this Psalm deals exclusively with the Messianic rule of Christ. The imperfection and even the despotic arbitrariness of the kings of the time (it is not clear whether David or Solomon is referred to here - the Authorized Version calls it a Psalm for Solomon, while in the New English Bible the Psalm ends with the words: "Here end the prayers of David son of Jesse") aroused a longing for Christ's perfect government. It is true that the portrayal that the Psalm offers of the government of the king indeed transcends any earthly king's rule. This is clear from the enormous region (about the whole of the erstwhile known world) over which he would rule.

Yet I am of the opinion that this prayer, in the form of a wish/desire (cf. the recurrent supplication "May ...") is also applicable to a human king or ruler. The old Afrikaans translation is perhaps not far off when it calls the Psalm

a coronation hymn. It is in any case a beautifully applicable prayer in the form of a hymn upon the ascent of the throne of a new ruler.

The responsibilities of the king

I am not providing the verses from which I am drawing the various points. These will be immediately apparent when you read the Psalm.

* In the first place there is the prayer that *God Himself will teach the sovereign to reign in accordance with God's will*. It is a very suitable introduction because when this happens, nothing more could be needed. Experience teaches, however, that rulers rather prefer to go according to their own will than with the will of God. Government, however, has to bow before the authority of God. It is therefore only legal as long as it does what God Himself expects of it. If the government should not do this, then it cannot expect the blessing of God (see the second point: the effects of a God-fearing government).

* Upon this follows that the king *should act with righteousness and justice*. The second "limitation" of the authority and power of the sovereign is therefore situated in the subjects. The subjects are not in the first place there to serve the state, but exactly the reverse.

If justice and righteousness flourish in the king's rule, he will be to his subjects like rain in a barren Palestine - refreshing, not terrifying. If all governments - including that of South Africa - would continually keep in mind righteousness and justice, we would all be living in a better world.

* In the third place the Psalm gets even more specific: *justice and righteousness to the poor and oppressed*. Among the poor of the time were counted widows, orphans, day-labourers, aliens and others. And like today, there were also groups and individuals who oppressed and exploited other groups and individuals. It is not only the Marxist who uses words like *oppressed* and *oppressor* - this Psalm did it centuries ago, and Old Testament prophecies are full of such terms.

The people who lag behind (are poor) and are oppressed therefore need the special attention of the authorities. Here too the sinful practice usually prevails: government officials are only too keen to offer advantage to the influential rich. Their voice is listened to, but not the voice of the less

privileged. It is these people, however, who have to be helped by a government wishing to rule according to the will of God, so that they may be protected against the "strong". Do we do this in our own country?

* In the fourth place the government also has a *task with regard to the oppressors*. The Psalm uses strong language: the king will liberate the oppressed and the poor from oppression and violence (oppression is a form of violence). It is not so that the oppressed should liberate themselves. No, it is the essential task of the government to do the liberating work.

The one side of the coin is liberation of the oppressed and on the other side there is the injunction that the oppressors should be crushed (verse 4).

Here too the Word of God rejects what is usually the order of the day in the corrupted world in which we live: governments who turn a blind eye to the deeds of the mighty and the oppressors, and who then in reality condone these insidious practices.

The effects if government according to the will of God

Should his prayer for the new king be realised, the following remarkable things will happen:

* His subjects and aliens *will (willingly) pay taxes*.

* There *will be respect* for such a government. Kings from far away will bring gifts and pay homage.

* They *will have joy* in his rule. One tends to read this with a grimace of doubt - is it really possible, in our world, that a king/government can rule in a way that he is a joy for his subjects?

* They *will pray for him* continually. Elsewhere in Scripture too subjects receive the injunction to pray for their governments, but here it happens spontaneously.

* The *fame of the king will spread* far and wide.

* *Great prosperity will reign*, as reflected in God's blessing on the harvest.

* The whole Psalm gives the impression that *there is great stability* in a government which rules according to God's will. Not only does the Bible teach this, but history confirms that governments based on justice and righteousness have a future. In contrast, governments which depend on power and violence are destroyed.

* *There will be peace in the country*. Righteousness always brings peace. Peace is not something which can of itself be pursued or forced - it is always the result or the reward which God offers to those who first pursue justice.

* The people (subjects) *serve the Lord with joy*. In verse 5 it does not state that the king rules according to God's will so that the people can serve the ruler, but that the people can serve God. A government does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of God. A government has to rule in such a way that people are not hindered in their vocation, which is service to the King of kings, but that they can have joy. And this should be true of the rich and the poor.

The Psalm closes with an invocation of joy and gratitude to God, and not to the king. (Although some exegetes prefer to see this as a closing invocation for the whole section of psalms from 42 to 72, and not just this psalm). A king who rules in this way is indeed a miracle that can be given only by God!

Application to us

Governments are not automatically villains and subjects angels of purity. Yet it is not wrong to make certain deductions about the nature of the government from the effects of a specific government's rule.

Is there respect for our government - among *all* subjects? Do they pray for it continually - or are some rather praying for its fall? Is the fame - or the notoriety - of the South African government known world-wide? Is there prosperity - for all - in our country? Is there peace among people? (No normal person will be able to call the measure of quiet which reigns under a state of emergency "peace"). Is the Lord served with joy or do even Christians battle among themselves?

These questions are not intended to blacken our government or to cast unnecessary aspersions. Whoever refuses, to honestly use the Word of God as a mirror to see and examine himself, or who insists on getting out of situations with a lame "Yes, ...but" is only deceiving himself.

This Psalm is not only an insistent prayer to God to give us a God-fearing government. It is also a flaming prophecy of inevitable destruction if a government does not rule according to the will of God.

If there is one prayer which in these days should daily rise like sweet incense in the presence of God, it is the prayer of Psalm 72!

Chapter 24

CHRIST AND THE WALLS OF SEPARATION IN OUR COUNTRY

(John 4: 1-42)

Jesus asked the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob near Sychar to give Him some of the water she had drawn from the deep well. He added that, if she had known who He was she would have asked water from Him (instead of the other way round), and He would have given her living water. By "living water" He meant flowing or life-giving water, that is, water that can cause new life to sprout (being the opposite of stagnant rotting water which is bad for man, animal or plant). For that reason water serves in the Bible as the symbol of spiritual life. In Jeremiah 2:13 God is called the source of living water. From John 7:38 and 39 we can deduce that this is also true of Christ, of his Spirit. In John 6:63 we also read that "it is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing", meaning that man himself cannot induce life.

The Samaritan woman, however, initially thought that Jesus was talking of ordinary flowing water - perhaps deep in the well, that she might not have been aware of. Therefore she said, with just a tinge of sarcasm, that Jesus did not even have something to draw water with from a depth of over 10 meters. Upon Jesus' tranquil reply that He could give her not only living water but water which would stop her from thirsting forever, the woman asked Him to give her some of that water, to stop her from having to come to the well every day to fetch water. The woman still did not understand properly. Perhaps her faith was contaminated by the pagan thought that there could exist some kind of magical water which could offer one a long life or even perhaps immortality. Or did she simply pretend not to understand? She well knew of the great thirst in her life: men! She also knew how she could not slake her thirst at the well of sin: six men!

You know the rest of the story. The woman finally realized that it was not an ordinary man talking to her. She even thought of the Messiah awaited by the Samaritans as well. And Jesus revealed Himself to her as the Christ: "I that speak unto thee am he" (verse 26).

The woman was so excited by her tremendous discovery that she even left her waterpot at the well - she had discovered better, living water! She hurried to the city of Sychar to carry the good news to her compatriots. The erstwhile immoral woman now became a carrier of the gospel! It is striking to note that she did not tell them of all the other things that Jesus had told her, but simply of what He had done in her own life. He knew everything about her life. He revealed her sins and convinced her that her way of life up to then could never allow her to slake her thirst. In this way then He also released her from her burden of sin.

On the basis of her testimony many Samaritans came to the well to see Christ and to listen to Him. They invited Him - a Jew! - to stay in their city for two days. The last part of this section states that they knew that "this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world" (verse 42).

The Samaritan woman and her compatriots really did drink of the living water of the Holy Spirit.

But whosoever receives the Spirit does not only drink. He becomes a fountain himself, for streams of living water will flow from him (cf. John 7:38b, and also John 4:11b and Isaiah 58:11b).

Demolishing walls is necessary for reformation

We have however, anticipated the story of the Samaritan woman. Many obstacles had to be removed by Christ before she could drink of the real living water.

It might well be that in our own country too this could be the reason underlying the deathly desolation of the churches and among many believers. Only radical reformation could reopen all the rusty taps so that the life-giving water can start flowing again.

Let us see whether the walls which Christ had to demolish in the life of the Samaritan woman do not perhaps exist today in the South African society.

If I read correctly, there were four such obstacles that He had to demolish: a wrong relationship with the Jews, wrong traditions, a wrong personal lifestyle and a wrong concept of God.

A wall between nations

For the Jews the Samaritans were dogs, and vice versa. Samaria was the area of the Ten Tribes (Israel). In the time of the kings there had been incessant warfare between Judea and Israel. After Israel had been taken away into exile, the king of Assyria settled nations in Samaria. These strangers mingled with the remnants of Israel and also introduced pagan elements into the Jewish religion. In the course of the reconstruction of Jerusalem the Samaritans also offered their help, but Zerubabel rejected it. From that time onwards there had been bitter enmity. The Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, and never returned to the temple in Jerusalem. In their turn the Jews, if they wanted to travel from south to north, chose to go by a roundabout route through heathen territory rather than to take the short route through Samaria.

So there was a wall of hate. Such spiritual dividing walls are, as you well know, of greater breadth and impenetrability than physical walls of fortified cement with barbed wire on top.

How refreshing then, to read that Christ paid no attention to the man-made dividing walls between the two nations. He simply travelled northwards to Bethel and from there through Samaria. The road led through the mountainous area and between the two well-known mountains Ebal and Gerizim. At the foot of the latter mountain lay the city of Sychar and to the south of the city the well of Jacob on the tract of land which Jacob had given to Joseph (Joshua 24:32).

This was his first step in ignoring the isolation and the polarization between the two nations. His second step was not to travel through the country, ignoring the people, but to engage a Samaritan, a woman, in conversation. What was more, this was an immoral woman. He also paid no attention when the woman exclaimed in surprise, asking Him how He, a Jew, could ask her, a Samaritan woman, for water to drink. There were more important issues at stake...

Christ's third "revolutionary" deed was that He accepted the invitation of the Sycharites to stay in their city for two days. His disciples could not have liked that idea very much.

And this was not the only time that Jesus would involve Himself with the despised Samaritans. In Luke 10:25-37 we read his well-known but always gripping parable of the good Samaritan. This too should have made the vengeful Jews blush (in anger or shame!). Luke 17:11-19 does not only tell a parable but of a true event. Only one of the ten lepers whom He had cured took the trouble to return and to thank Him warmly. And this man had been a Samaritan! To the shame of the proud Jews this man was given not merely an earthly cure but everlasting life.

Do we not today have precisely the same situation here in South Africa? Suspicion, mistrust, denigration, hate among the various races and nations in the country have caused skyhigh walls to come into existence dividing even the Christians among us. May we draw courage from the example of Christ to send our bulldozers fearlessly in to demolish these walls of racism and other ideologies.

To build a fence around oneself has one great problem: it always excludes more than it includes. One impoverishes oneself unnecessarily by cutting oneself off from other people and nations.

But the walls tend to become so high after a while that one cannot catch a glimpse any more of the open sky above. Then we finally reach the point which the Jews and the Samaritans had reached: each nation has its own temple where its people can worship alone. With our separate churches and divine services we stand precisely where the Jews and Samaritans stood then. Instead of our being enriched by diversity, we simply created division.

The wall of traditionalism

This we see from the reaction of the woman when Jesus said that He would be able to give her living water: "Art thou greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank thereof himself..." (verse 12).

By referring to Jacob as her ancestor she wanted to make the Jew understand clearly that Jacob had not been only the ancestor of the Jews. She also wanted to rub it in that it was the Samaritans and not the Jews who were living in the original region of father Jacob.

Oh, tradition, hallowed tradition! How have we not become mired in it in South Africa today. Do we not also have our Jacobs, our saints from the past, to whom we ascribe superhuman powers and insight? In the case of the Jews and the Samaritans they were still able to put the halo around the head of just one man. In our country we have a whole congregation of saints for practically each nation. I do not need to mention examples. You can think of a whole string of them without much trouble - from the ranks of political and church leaders from both sides of the fence of race.

If one desires to reform, neither past, present nor future should be the criterion, but only the infallible Word of God. Our leaders of the past were also fallible human beings, children of their own times. We ought to be able to see more clearly than they could.

May God grant us the grace that we will be able to rise above our pet traditions and discover brothers and sisters in the faith on the other side of the wall.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek (nor Samaritan, Afrikaner, Englishman, Black man, Coloured, Asian, Chinese or Korean), there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Jesus Christ. And if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28, 29).

The wall of our personal sins

One can so easily try to divert attention from oneself and one's own sins as the Samaritan woman tried to do with Jesus. One might be involved in converting the world, and then forget that reformation starts with the self - otherwise reformation of the world around oneself is a mere mirage, an empty word.

Like Gideon (Judges 6:25-28) we first have to remove the idols from among us before we can go on. The greatest danger in his day had not been the Midianites, but the Baal service of the Israelites themselves. In the same way we are today our own greatest enemies.

Once we have seen and realized this - the corruption within our own lives and our own homes - then we can more easily cure ourselves of the typically South African trait of looking for the threats outside ourselves only.

The Samaritan woman needed Someone to expose her sins. In the same way we still have the need today for fellow-believers to look at us objectively and to point out our mistakes even though this might hurt. Let us not be euphemistic but open and honest - without being of necessity hurtful and reproachful - in pointing out the mistakes of all the groups mutually. And: May God grant us the mercy not to look only at others but also to look deep into our own dark and sinful hearts.

The wall of religion

Do not be surprised if even the most holy of things, one's service to God, can be a divisive wall. This is the final - and the most impenetrable? - obstacle which Jesus had to break down in the Samaritan woman. "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship" (verse 20).

Here we have perhaps the greatest tragedy of the division between nations who cannot find each other. How many sacred places (many of them already historical monuments!) do the various nations in South Africa not have. You know them so well that I do not need to name them. It is especially my own Afrikaner nation who is so eager at maintaining these shrines.

But the most tragic of all is that this sort of thing is not limited to places of worship. God Himself, and the very act of worship come in time to be annexed for one's own nation. Thus the fact that in South Africa today we find such widely divergent images of the true God. For one group God is the god of the *status quo*, for another He is the god of liberation!

The words of Christ to the Samaritan woman can be liberating for us. The place where one worships does not determine whether one's prayer is heard or accepted. Because even if we should wish to appropriate God for ourselves and for our cause, we can never succeed in something like that. God is spirit, and for that reason He is not bounded by place. He is omnipresent, and always ready to listen.

Prayer also has nothing to do with ritual prescriptions and outward show. The only requirement is that it has to take place through the Spirit and in all truth (verse 23). The Spirit has to call to God the Father through us. And when a prayer is made in truth, without hypocritical false intentions, God

will not be deaf to us. The Samaritan woman was able to elevate her heart to God right there at the well.

If God grants us His grace, we can be assured of the fact that we will not only demolish the four walls mentioned here, but also all the barbed wire fences (by means of which we try so hard to protect ourselves) will melt like wax in the heat of the Sun of Justice.

My heartfelt wish is that we may drink of the true Fountain of life. And also that we might discover the food which Jesus mentions in this gripping chapter when his disciples could not understand why He did not wish to eat anything: "My meal is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (verse 34).

Chapter 25

BUILDERS OR DEMOLISHERS?

(Nehemiah 1 - 4)

South Africa is at present experiencing a time of demolition - or so many people believe. Houses burn, schools are often in flames. What parents have brought together with hard work and sweat in the course of a lifetime is often destroyed in a moment by children - at times even their own. People have even been burnt alive.

Even if the revolution is at present affecting the Black people more, it dare not leave us unaffected. Among them are our brothers and sisters as well.

2 500 years into the past

We seem to live in a time of breaking down. At times it is necessary to demolish the wrong structures - also those in our own country, so that better ones can arise in their place. Christians have always been hesitant, however, to see violence and murder as a solution. Reformed believers have always preferred reformation in the place of revolution. Revolution breaks and destroys, while reformation builds and renews.

For those who are faint of heart and devoid of hope the history of more than 2 500 years ago might be an encouragement. This is the history described in the first chapters of Nehemiah.

The people of Judah were sent to Babel as exiles. About 48 years later the Persians took over from the Babylonians and 50 000 Jews were sent to Palestine, a destroyed Jerusalem and a demolished temple. After a great deal of encouragement on the side of Haggai and Zechariah the temple was rebuilt after a space of twenty years.

Ruined wall

The Jews began with the church which was the right beginning. The walls of the city, however, were still in ruins and the great gates burnt. In those days the walls and gates were essential, because without them one could

not be safe and everybody was vulnerable to attack by enemies and robbers.

The ruined walls were symbolic of the totally degenerate state of the nation of Israel in those days.

Economically there was great poverty among the exiles who were returning to a ruined country. The few rich ones exploited the poor ones to the extent that they were forced to sell their own wives and children! Excessively high taxes were levied by Persia. They also could not rely on their neighbours (the Samaritans and others).

Culturally too they were in a terrible state. They had become used to a foreign language and alien customs. The nation had lost identity and hope.

In the field of *religion* they were really at a low ebb. The Sabbath was not observed any longer, the temple was used for trade, the priests were not supported, the tithes were not paid and the Israelites were even marrying heathens.

What does it look like in South Africa today? Can we not point a finger to disintegration in many fields?

Does he listen as we do?

In the far-off Babel colleague Ganani came to tell Nehemiah of the shattering conditions in Jerusalem. Did he look at these as we often do when we hear of and see disasters and floods on television? No.

* *He inquired further* to determine exactly what was going on. He was deeply troubled. Are we truly involved in what is happening to our Indian, Coloured and Black co-believers? And do they inquire about how we feel?

* *He sat down* for days on end. We also feel like this - helpless under the state of emergency.

* *He wept*. Have you not also felt like this when witnessing the senseless violence, destruction and hatred? Or must the fire begin to burn in our own houses before we start weeping for South Africa?

* *He fasted.* This was not a hunger strike, but a way of humbling oneself before God.

Many believers in the Old and New Testament times - including Christ - also fasted, and many have done so since. Today this has become a practically extinct custom.

* *He prayed.* Note how Nehemiah prayed. He began with God and the glory of God, and not with the sufferings of his country. We so often begin and end our prayers with our own petty little needs. We have not yet learnt from "The Lord's Prayer" that God's kingdom comes first, before our daily bread...

He also confessed the sin of his nation and of his own home - in concrete terms. It is not like our vague confessions of sin. It is therefore important today that Black and White should examine their own hearts and see what they have done wrong and confess to this by name.

Nehemiah also asked something specific in his prayer. In contrast to us, he did not flounder around in generalities in his prayer.

* *He rose again.* Even though he was very afraid of making a request to his Persian king to allow him to return to Jerusalem to rebuild it, he did not remain sitting. He found strength in prayer. We should also do that.

Opposition

Whoever wants to build rather than to demolish will often run into opposition. Nehemiah also experienced this.

The nation was behind Nehemiah like one man and supported the building. But the strangers Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem hated them and did not make it easy for them. They knew that the Jews would regain their courage and self-respect once Jerusalem was safe again. The following methods were used:

* *Mockery:* Do you want to complete the work in one day? Would you like to rise against the mighty Persian king? Leave them alone - the wall will fall down if a jackal leans against it!

Hatred hurts, but ridicule hurts even more. Nobody likes to be made ridiculous.

But Nehemiah simply said that the Lord would help them achieve it.

* *Conspiracy*: When Nehemiah did not want to listen to mockery, they would stand together and destroy him and his people. Nobody needs to tell South Africans anything about this.

Nehemiah was forced to arm his people. In the one hand they carried a trowel, in the other a sword. But the building went on. Is this not also precisely the situation in which we find ourselves in this Southland which we have to build? Those who still want to build have to be protected against the destroyers.

* *Compromise*: When hatred, ridicule and conspiracy did not work, Tobiah and his men came up with a more insidious weapon. They invited Nehemiah to come and talk to them outside the city. Why not be friends?

Nehemiah was a great man. He said "No.!" four times and stuck to it. True reformation (I am not talking about pseudo-reformation) can never close a friendship with revolution. The roots from which they spring, the purpose which they envisage and the methods which they use differ radically. Can a Christian accept murder as a means to change?

* *Betrayal*: An even more frightening weapon was used against Nehemiah by his enemies to paralyse him. Nehemiah visited Semanah who had locked himself in his own house. Semanah tried to frighten Nehemiah and suggested that they should flee into the temple and lock themselves into this sturdy building. To use the church as a hiding place would not help, would it? Nehemiah refused to run away and went on building.

The Miracle

Many people today advise us to run, to flee from South Africa while there is still time. Or they flee to their "safe" temples, such as money, power, weapons, ideologies. Or like the proverbial ostrich they stick their heads in the sand. They put on blinkers so that they do not need to face reality.

We need people like Nehemiah in the South Africa of today, people who can say with conviction: I am staying here, to build.

A miracle occurred. After only 52 days the walls and the gates were finished. Even the enemies of the nation had to concede that the work had been done with the help of the Lord.

For our country and its people too there is still hope. The calling to build need not succumb to the urge to destroy. If we convert ourselves to the Lord He will let us have success.

"Fear" was not a word known to the vocabulary of Nehemiah, and it should also not belong to a Christian's vocabulary. Among those condemned to hell in Revelation 21:8 are the fearful first of all - mentioned in the same breath as the murderers, adulterers and idolators.

"For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7). The Holy Spirit gives us all we need for this critical time that we are living in: fearlessness in the place of fear of the future; strength in the place of weakness; love instead of hatred between men and nations; self-control in the place of immorality or of vengeance.

Let us build!

THE MEANING OF LIFE AND WORK

Chapter 26

IS IT REALLY WORTHWHILE?

(Romans 14:7, 8; Philippians 1:21 - 25)

I would like to direct your attention to two Scriptural passages, viz. Romans 14 verses 7 and 8 and Philippians 1 verses 21 to 25. In these passages God offers us a reply to one of the most important questions that man can ask: What is the purpose or the meaning of my existence? What do I live for?

The meaning of life

Animals are quite content simply to live. Man's life is different. He does not simply live for the sake of living. This he experiences as a senseless existence. His life has to be directed at something. It should have a window, open up on something more, something greater.

Man is a religious being in all that he thinks and does. Religion is not an activity which is limited to Sunday, to going to church, to reading the Bible and to personal prayer. The whole of life is religion.

Religion is thus something *total*: it permeates the whole of man's existence. Religion is *radical*: it offers a secure foundation for man's existence. Religion is *central*: it offers a specific direction and directedness of purpose to man's life. Religion is *integral*: it binds together the divergent things which one does to a meaningful unity.

When in the beginning God created man to his image, it meant that man's whole life was directed towards God. Adam and Eve's lives in paradise had sense and meaning because they obeyed God's commandments. The core of God's law is love, and this they observed. It made their lives meaningful and rich, full of joy!

The Fall did not destroy this relationship towards God, but changed its course: man came to stand towards his Creator in a negative relationship. His obedience to and service of God no longer give meaning to his existence. Because man remains a religious being, however, he now has

to find something else to give meaning to his life. And this can only be something in God's creation.

Therefore we find a great variety of responses to the question: "What do you live for?". One would live for money, a second for the sake of enjoyment, a third for the sake of gaining fame and repute, for the sake of gaining power, to work, etc.

Somebody would also be able to look a bit further and answer: "I live for my children\tribe\nation\country".

If one should analyse these responses, however, it always amounts to the same basic problem: "I am living for *my* sake" (whether it be *my* wealth, *my* enjoyment, *my* fame, *my* children or nation or country).

Such a life is a *closed* life. It is not a life which rises *above itself* to Somebody *more and greater* than man. If one seeks the meaning of one's life in oneself or in something of this creation, it has lost its sense, it has become meaningless. And no person can live with meaninglessness for long. He might for a time hide it or try to evade it. But at last, if he is honest, he would rather destroy himself than go on living meaninglessly. You know for yourselves how many rich, powerful and famous people commit suicide.

The Bible is filled with the fact that it is vain if one rises early, works hard and goes to sleep late if his work is not directed at God and has God's blessing (cf. only Psalm 127:2 and Proverbs 10:22).

Now you should be able to understand the depth of Romans 14:7: "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself". And then, in verse 8, Paul reminds us of God's original purpose for us: "For whether we live, we live unto the Lord, and whether we die, we die unto the Lord".

It is curious: Can one also die for the glory of God?

The meaning of death

Living and dying are closely linked together. Martin Luther King said that if one did not have an ideal for which one would be willing to die, it was not worthwhile living. We would also be able to invert this: If one did not

have an ideal to live for, it would not be worthwhile to die for it - or: it is better simply to end one's life.

Many people live in fear of death (because it is meaningless to them), and try to hold on to life at all costs. Other people cannot go on looking (meaningless) life in the face and they flee through committing suicide.

Can death also have meaning? This is an important question because nothing is quite as certain as death. We can meet death at any moment.

If one's life really has meaning, even dying is not meaningless.

This Paul teaches us in Philippians 1:21: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain". In the original Greek the "for to me" stands uppermost. Paul, as it were, wishes to say that it does not matter what life is for others, for *him* it is Christ. With these words the great apostle betrays the deepest secret of his labour, his struggle and his perseverance, of the whole of his rich life. The meaning of his life was not simply money, things and enjoyment, but *only* God. God Himself in Christ gave his life security, direction, fastness and unity.

As a church tower points upwards, Paul's life also pointed in only one direction: away from himself, above himself. In all that he did, he did not glorify himself but only Christ. And to the extent that Christ became greater and more important in his life, to the same extent he had a fuller, richer, more meaningful life. To live for Christ only therefore does not mean a destruction of your humanity - it means the fullest deployment of your humanity.

Such a meaningful life also means that death is not meaningless any longer. The original Greek could also be translated as follows: "Life for me is Christ, and *therefore* dying is gain". It is therefore not at all a mawkish longing for death that we find in Paul. Just as it does not, for him, go about life for the sake of life, so he is not concerned with death as such. Death for him is gain, for then he will be with Christ (verse 23). And to be in the presence of God is the essence of salvation.

Paul had been in mortal danger many times in the course of his life. And he is in prison when he writes these words. However, he is not afraid of either death or life.

He also does not *choose* between life and death. He quietly leaves it to God to decide. Personally he would prefer to be rid of all the struggle and trouble. Because he knows, however, that he is living for Christ, he also lives for his fellowmen. And he knows that it is essential for their sakes that he should keep living. He has to remain, so that they can gain in faith and joy in Christ - so that life for them too would be Christ only.

The meaning of our work

Our consolation and our task as believers are closely related. Our *consolation* is summed up by the very first Sunday of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, in the following terms: "My only consolation in life and in death is that I belong not to myself but to my faithful redeemer, Jesus Christ". In the light of the foregoing our *task* would be: "That in life and in death I should seek not myself, but serve Christ only".

Do not therefore lose faith when you think of the magnitude of our task - and the fact that our means and strength are small.

I greet you with the words of Paul to the Corinthians (1Cor. 15:58): "Therefore my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord!"

Chapter 27

ALL IS VAIN, WITHOUT THE BLESSING OF THE LORD

(Psalm 127:1-4; Matthew 6:25-32)

Many older people are under the impression that the young people of today - especially students - have a carefree and untrammelled life. You have not yet been caught up in the vicious circle of workolism - working to be able to eat and eating to be able to work! Young people would presumably not have the truly awful awareness yet that it is all in vain, all a mad scramble for nothing (in line with what is said in Ecclesiastes).

I do not believe that people who reason like this really know the young people of today. It is often true that young people, who have their lives before them, are facing a future that seems bleak and grim. While many of the older generation still had a relatively quiet youth, the young people of today are increasingly faced with the senseless chasing after wind from a very early age. Uncertainty about the future of the country, and therefore also their personal future, faces them every day.

Psalm 127 directs our attention (by means of referring to three examples) to the fact that what we are doing might indeed be vain.

1. When would our life and work be in vain?

The three examples mentioned by the psalmist also typify our lives: We are all *builders*, *guards* and *labourers*. Think of the command given to man at creation to work in the Garden of Eden and to guard it. Each person is a builder: of his own life, of his marriage, his family, within his society.

The interesting thing here is that concrete issues are dealt with: building a house, guarding a city, working hard. The truth to which Solomon - being a very active man - wishes to direct our attention is therefore not only applicable to so-called spiritual work.

Those who build a house, work in vain if the Lord does not also build. Those who guard a city do it in vain if the Lord does not protect it. Those who get

up early to work, and go to bed late in order to toil for existence, do so in vain if

Thus the harsh, radical judgement comes threefold from God Himself: "Vain!".

It is therefore of great importance that we should determine *how* God builds a house, *how* He guards a city, *what* He has to do with our daily sweat and toil.

You will directly be aware of how it should *not* be done. It cannot mean that we should sit back and leave the building, guarding and working to God. It is part of our essential human nature. The same Solomon also, in Proverbs, cautions against laziness!

It is therefore not really a case *whether* we should work, but *how* we should work. We should never build, guard or labour as if all depended on us, as if we were busy with that ourselves, on our own.

The "vain" will be applicable to us if in our building we depended solely on ourselves; if we trusted one hundred percent in our own vigilance; if we expected our own work and achievements to provide in everything. We are confronted here with something puzzling: our work, which is also the work of God. We do not know how these link up with each other, but they cannot be separated.

2. How should we then live and work?

The wonderful aspect of this is that God has given us the command to build, guard (conserve) and work in his creation, but at the same time, when we have fulfilled his command, He forbids us to put our trust in it.

We are great. What an important task, what an enormous responsibility, does man not have towards the whole of creation! But we are also humble and small, and God wishes us daily to become humbler and smaller, be more fully aware of our dependence on Him, think more of Him and less of ourselves.

The humbler we are in our own eyes, the bigger and more important are we in his eyes.

The blessing of the Lord - because that is the deep secret that we encounter here - is seemingly only intended for those who expect nothing of themselves, but everything of God. And without his blessing nothing is worth anything. Without it our building, guarding and labouring are all totally in vain. But the obverse is also true: with the blessing of the Lord our lives are rich and full. The same Solomon says in Proverbs 10:22: "The blessing of the Lord brings riches, and sends no sorrow with them".

What puzzling thing is a blessing, then, that its addition can make such a difference? We know that the Bible is full of it, but what exactly does it mean?

Each Sunday, before we leave church, an age-old event is fulfilled. As a father took leave of his children by speaking a blessing over them (for example, the arch fathers of the Old Testament), so the minister speaks a blessing, a benediction over the congregation (for example, Numbers 6:22-27; 2 Corinthians 13:13 and Revelation 1:4,5). For us it is often no more than a fitting ending - we do not realize what an important event it is in reality. The same is true when the congregation sings a benediction to somebody, as in Psalm 121:5-8 and Psalm 134:4.

We could never truly express what the blessing of the Lord is - it is a mystery as deep and impenetrable as God Himself. The results are very clear, however. A blessing is something that makes life flourish and grow, which imparts a beneficial strength to us. An example of this is when the nation of Israel listened to the Law of the Lord from the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim. Should they obey the Law, the Lord would bless them - if they should not, his curse would hit them. Gerizim, a luxuriant, fertile mountain, symbolized the blessing of the Lord as opposed to Ebal, a dry, bare rock. When Christ cursed the fig tree that bore no fruit, it dried up immediately and started to die.

The blessing of the Lord is not something that is added, an extra. It is an essential part of things. In the most fundamental sense it determines our work.

3. What is the difference if we should live and work correctly?

In the word "Unless the Lord builds the house ...", the psalmist does not deny the fact that building a house is hard work. It does not spiritualize

ordinary labour. It does not deny that building a house demands planning, has an economic facet (it usually costs a great deal of money), an aesthetic side (we would like to have attractive houses), and that sand, cement, bricks, wood, roofing and paint are needed. It is typical of Scripture, however, that it directs our attention to the most fundamental, the essential, the religious nature of all human endeavour and labour.

Later in the Psalm it is said, for example, that children are a gift from the Lord. In line with this, people will still say today, upon the birth of a child, "We have received a child from the Lord". This does not mean that they deny that the child came into being through their love for each other, or that the mother carried the child for nine months and then brought the child into the world with the aid of a doctor. All these biological details are not the focal point for Scripture, however. In the language of faith, it offers the final or the most profound truth: children are a gift, not something that we deserve, but a blessing from the Lord.

The same is true of biblical historiography: it is not ordinary history, but depth history. In whatever way the kings of Judah and Israel distinguished themselves in economic, military and other fields it is not narrated to us. All that is said is how they were disposed towards the Lord in their hearts.

The words "Unless the Lord keeps watch over the city ..." do not mean that the guards can leave their posts. They still have to maintain vigilance all the time. Should they, however, ascribe security in the final instance to their own vigilance, they are missing the truth. In the final instance they are totally dependent on the "Guardian of Israel [Who] never slumbers or sleeps" (Psalm 121:4).

And naturally this is not only true of a city. It is also true of a state, a whole country. If we wish to trust only in the government and the defence force (even if they have the latest in weaponry) for the security of our country, then the irrevocable judgement of God resounds: "Vain!".

However, Paul reassures us that our labour *in* the Lord, that is, our labour in dependence on God, is never vain.

The character of our work also changes totally. The Psalmist contrasts those who get up early, who stay up late and who toil incessantly in worry and agony, with those whom the Lord loves. The Lord gives that which

others incessantly pursue to those whom He loves in their sleep, in other words, while they are doing nothing! This does not mean that they can simply fold their hands in lazy bliss. During the day their sleeves were also rolled up, but then they could tranquilly, full of inner peace, seek their rest. They left the outcome of their work to the Lord!

Christ commands us, therefore, in the section of the New Testament that we read together (Matthew 6:25-34), not to worry about what we should eat and drink, or cover our bodies with, and also not about the future. Our future is in his hands, and therefore it is not a closed but an open future.

He refers us to the birds and the flowers. The birds do not anxiously gather together so that they will have something to eat tomorrow. God looks after them. And the flowers of the veld are not concerned about their raiment, and yet they are more gloriously bedecked than the glorious king Solomon.

If God cares for plant and for animal, why not the more for us, the builders, the guardians, the labourers - the crown of his creation?

Young brothers and sisters, try to reflect on the present and possible future political dispensation of this country. This is essential. As Christians we have to be involved in every sphere of life.

But I would not be surprised in the least if (possibly only late at night, once you are alone) you are beset by doubt and uncertainty. It is not wrong, because we may not find the final security in our own visions of the future. God alone can offer us the final security. Then we can really be without cares and approach the future with joy and serenity.

Therefore we take leave this morning with the age-old priestly benediction:

The Lord will bless
and protect us;
The Lord will save us
and give us mercy;
The Lord will answer our prayers
and give us peace.

Amen.

Chapter 28

STRENGTH IN SMALLNESS

(Mark 4: 30 - 32)

There are more such brief but powerful parables of Jesus to indicate the presence of the Christian in this world. Our calling in this world has been compared to salt (Matthew 5:13), light (Matthew 5:14-16), and yeast (Matthew 13:33).

Let us look briefly at three ideas only: the smallness, the growth and then the stature (the greatness) of the mustard seed.

The smallness

The kingdom of God will be compared by Christ with something. With what? We wait in suspense. And then we are given the surprise: "...it is a mustard seed..."

Why with seed? Why not rather with something somewhat more impressive, larger, stronger? Because seed is worthless if it is not sown. (Some seeds, like wheat, can serve as food, but not mustard seed.) In order to be at work in the kingdom of God then, we need to be sowers (cf. also the parable of Christ in Matthew 13).

We will have to plough, to sow and to irrigate. If the blessing of God rests upon our labours, then there will be a harvest. Sowing is hard, humble work. We must die to self (and sometimes as martyrs), like the seed in the soil, so that the kingdom might grow....

Why then the mustard seed of all seeds? The Lord Jesus here ties in with a Jewish proverb. If something was very small and insignificant, they spoke of it being "as small as a mustard seed". The beginning of the kingdom is equally small. This is true if we look at the *King*, the *message* and the *citizens* of this kingdom.

The *King* is not born in an impressive palace in Rome or in Jerusalem, so that the whole world hears the news. No, He is born in a stable and initially

only Joseph and Mary know of the event. He does not grow up in the capital city of a powerful kingdom, but in a scarcely regarded village in Palestine.

The *message* that He brings is not that, through armed violence He will turn Israel into a world power in three years' time, which will wipe the mighty Roman Empire off the face of the earth. His subjects have to learn to become small and humble before the face of God rather than great and powerful in the sight of the world. Instead of *power* they have to use *love* to conquer the world.

The first *subjects* of the kingdom of God are not highly placed citizens and powerful personages, but fishermen, tax collectors, simple women and children.... (cf. also I Corinthians 1:26-28).

What can come of such a mustard seed kingdom?

We are only too ready to associate smallness with weakness and uselessness. But wait. As in the atom great power lies locked up, so in the mustard seed too.

The growth

The tiny seed grows and grows until it becomes a tree three metres high! No wonder that the Jews had decided that, even though mustard could be regarded as a vegetable it could not be sown inside the vegetable garden, as it would crowd out all the other vegetables. Somebody who does not know this seed will be totally stunned by what it can do.

In this precise fashion things went in the kingdom of God. When Christ was buried like seed in the earth, it seemed as if it had all been in vain. But no - He pushed the rock which had to keep him imprisoned in the grave away and like the mustard He rose from the dead.

After the advent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost there could be no stopping the growth of the kingdom. On one day 3 000 people from various nations and language groups came to conversion. The gospel spread like fire in Asia, to Europe, to Africa ... Even if the growth tempo of Christendom decreased dramatically in the West in the last 60 years of this century (more than two million per year!) it has grown at a tremendous rate in Africa and in countries such as South Korea.

The work of sowing goes on and through the grace of God growth too is going on. If we sow the right seeds in the right way, the growth and the harvest will not be denied us. For that we have the personal assurance of the King of the kingdom!

The greatness

This brings us to the eventual greatness of the mustard tree - entirely out of proportion to its humble origins. It becomes larger than all the other vegetables. It is not an ordinary vegetable - just as the kingdom of God is not an ordinary kingdom. It is not bound by the borders of a small vegetable garden - just as the kingdom of God is not limited to the closet, the inner room, or the church. It does not offer shade for one nation only. The birds (plural) of the heavens find sanctuary in its branches - this kingdom is not limited by race, by colour or any of these.

Now we can begin to understand why the Lord Jesus Christ does not compare his kingdom to huge trees, as happens so often in Scripture. In Ezekiel 31:3-9 the Assyrian empire is compared with a cedar. In Daniel 4 the same is done for the mighty Nebuchadnezzar and his empire. One could do the same for the Roman Empire at the time of Christ's sojourn on earth. (The Roman historian Eutrophius, for example, says that no Empire started out smaller and became larger than the Roman Empire.)

Where the world empires are compared with huge, impressive, proud trees, this points to pride, their so-called independence of God. (Cf. Ezekiel 31:10 ff. and Daniel 4:27). As compared to this, the kingdom of heaven is built on humility, modesty, smallness in the face of God. Christ deliberately does not compare his kingdom with a mighty cedar, so that we can have no reason to elevate ourselves.

What has become of all the mighty empires (those of Babel, of Egypt, of Assyria, the Chaldaic-Babylonian, the Medes and the Persians, the Greek-Macedonian and the Roman)? They do not exist any more! New empires - which have also since perished - succeeded them. But the kingdom of God is still quietly growing today.

We should not allow ourselves to be frightened off by all the political struggle going on in South Africa and the rest of Africa. All these will pass. But the kingdom of God will go on to eternity ...

We should therefore never become despondent if we are involved in our small efforts. Christ's disciples once asked Him to give them more faith (Luke 17:5). What was His reply? "If ye had faith like a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this mulberry tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you".

Faith like a mustard seed - what does it mean? The concern is not so much with more or greater faith, but with faith as growing power. Faith like a mustard seed which *lives* is worth more than a mountain of faith which has stagnated. A Christian is not like a telephone pole which is firmly fixed in the earth but which cannot grow any more. A Christian is rather like a mustard seed which germinates and grows.

Groen van Prinsterer has said that in our isolation lay our strength. We today have to say that our strength lies in our smallness. This parable by Christ is a hymn of praise in miniature. It wishes to imprint indelibly on us the fact that those who work in His kingdom should never be contemptuous of small beginnings!

THE BEATITUDES OF OUR KING

Chapter 29

INTRODUCTION

(Matthew 5:1-12)

A ninefold surprise

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is the most wonderful and also the most astonishing sermon in the possession of mankind, not because it was preached from a mountain rather than a pulpit, but because it emanated from the mouth of the greatest and most absorbing preacher who ever lived.

The introduction to this sermon, the beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12), are perhaps the most astonishing of all.

In order to clearly perceive the surprising element in the beatitudes, we have to note two things: in the first place the *preamble* and in the second place the *content* of this part of the sermon.

An inverted order

The preamble is stunning. Christ preaches in a totally different manner from the Pharisees and the Scribes of the day. These Jewish religious leaders of the time would have started by condemning the crowd thronging the mountain because of their evil ways, because they did not know and did not observe the Law of God. The people listening to Christ, like all of us today - man has not changed much in two thousand years - quested, in their own way, after a little personal happiness. There were those who were poor, who were mourning, who were hungry, ill, who had been insulted, oppressed, who had sinned. They did not receive much consolation from the church leaders of the time, though - rather condemnation.

The Scribes believed in men's deserts - man got what he deserved. They had no need of beatitudes. The crowd first had to observe the Law of the Lord - with all their thousands of small additions and refinements - and then they would obtain salvation. Whoever did not enter through the narrow

gateway of the Law would never be happy. It was the *end* of the road that would bring salvation, not the *beginning*!

It is needless to say that in most of the people all hope of happiness had evaporated. Little did they know that they had come closer to happiness at the very moment when they thought they had lost all chance of it.

Christ clears away the rubble of ages under which the Pharisees had buried the message of joy. He makes a 180 degree turn-about: He *begins* not by condemning but by blessing. Happiness is not rewarded virtue at the end of the long road, but undeserved grace right at the beginning. His Way is not a hard, toiling road of suffering with (possibly) a little happiness at the end of it. No, his way is a road of joy right from the beginning!

For that reason it is also a way on which man can do much. Once one has received this divine *gift*, the *duty* (fulfilling the Law) becomes a joy as well. Once one has *received*, one can also *do*.

It is no wonder then that the crowd was stunned and surprised by Christ's sermon. It was revolutionary: first the gift (grace) and then the duty (faith).

The order which Christ sets out here is surprising. Happiness is not something which one can go and seek straight out and simply find. It is always the indirect result of something else which man seeks. If you are seeking justice, peace and compassion, then you will find happiness as a gift. "Seek first the kingdom God ..." Whoever seeks to start off with happiness, like so many today, begin at the wrong end of the scale!

Do we not still live like the churchmen of Christ's lifetime? Do we live fully in the concept of grace, or are we still contaminated by the poison of the smug Pharisaic work ethos culminating in a theology of deserving? If this is not the case, why then is there so little joy in our lives? Have we not also replaced the joy from our everyday lives to a possible blessed end in eternity? Christ wants to teach us to start with joy in salvation: each day, and in every task we fulfil. The blessedness and joy is the *beginning* of all, which permeates everything.

Christ's method of beginning his sermon is the first great surprise in the beatitudes. What He goes on to say in the various beatitudes, however, constitutes a further surprise.

Salvation - for those least expecting it

Who are the people who receive a blessing from the Lord? The poor, the bereaved, the hungry, the oppressed, the people suffering insults. It is these people (according to the stress in the Greek text) who are, in Christ's words, blessed. But they are the people whom we regard above all as not being happy!

But this is not even half the surprise. When we ask *why* He calls them happy, we hear even more surprising things. The poor are so rich that they possess a kingdom, the sorrowing can expect consolation, the oppressed and the insulted can be joyful - is this not insane? But this is exactly what is stated, and it is no mistake.

It is difficult to translate the Greek word *makarios*. The English translations mostly use the word *blessed* or *blest*.

Christ here personally promises the highest, purest blessedness. And he does not say *makarios!* once only, but nine times, repeating it like a refrain.

Once again the question arises: Do we live like people who have been blessed nine times? If we have no joy in life, the fault is to be sought not in Him who blesses us, because He does not use words idly. Believers, Christians, should be the happiest people in the world, people who see no end to their happiness.

It will therefore be doubly worthwhile to study the beatitudes carefully. This is the right place to begin - because Christ wants us to enter life through the gate with *Makarios!* written over it.

Answers to further questions such as *Where? When? For whom? About what?* can help us to understand the beatitudes better.

Where?

The beatitudes constitute part of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:1 it says that Christ first climbed the mountain before beginning to preach the sermon. The article indicates a specific mountain which had to be generally known in those days. We do not know which mountain it was - the only sure thing is that the mountain has to be sought in the vicinity of

Capernaum, because from Matthew 8:1 and 5 it emerges that Christ arrived there after his descent from the mountain.

Since the third century the location of the Sermon on the Mount has been sought in the Karn Hattin, close to Capernaum. It is an extinct volcano with two peaks that from a distance resemble two towers. Should this really be the place where the sermon was preached, one can hardly think of a more attractive site. To the north there is Mount Hermon, rearing a silver crown above the landscape. To the south there are the heights of Tabor and Carmel. To the east there is the exquisite lake of Gennesaret ringed by hills, and to the west, far away, the Mediterranean sparkles. The whole landscape is filled with lilies abounding in the valleys...

Some are of the opinion that this mountain (319 metres) would require a stiff climb and would therefore not be suitable for addressing a huge crowd. Instead of looking for a specific peak, then, they feel that the rough highland surrounding Capernaum is more likely - the isolated and lonely world to which Christ retreated often (Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42). *Mount* would then rather indicate this highland covered in grass and strewn with blocks of basalt.

This links more closely to Luke 6:17, which informs us that the Lord Jesus climbed down from the mount (Matthew speaks of climbing *up*) to a level place. From Luke 6:12 it emerges indeed that Jesus had spent the night up there in prayer, and after He had chosen his twelve disciples the following morning, He climbed down to the plateau with them to face the crowd.

When?

We have just seen that Christ spoke the Sermon on the Mount on the same day that He chose his disciples. It is therefore in the period of his public appearance, and in Galilee. It was not at the beginning of his public appearance (cf. Matthew 4:17-25) but during its continuation. In all events, we are still near the beginning of his public appearance, and one could well call the Sermon on the Mount his inaugural sermon.

Some exegetes declare that it was springtime. "Nature was joyful and sparkling. The lovely dale of Yisrael was a sea of flowers: tulips and carnations, irises and lilies in full bloom. And against the hills the flowers

also cascaded. Easter was past, summer was coming in. Nature sang a hymn of joy" (J.H. Bavinck).

For whom?

The question as to the audience to whom the sermon was directed is important, because there are those who maintain that it was only to the circle of the twelve, and they base their assumption on the fact that the Sermon today still is only valid for some people. According to Matthew 5:1,2 it would indeed seem as if Christ had fled from the multitude and spoke only to his disciples. According to Luke 6:17-19, however, it is clear that the audience consisted of both his disciples and a large multitude of the nation.

As will emerge from the next point (*About what?*) Christ in the Sermon on the Mount demands *radical, absolute* obedience. To evade the demand, some people have maintained that his commandments are only applicable within the church, or only for personal, not public life, or only for the "perfect" among his followers (for example, the apostles) and not for "ordinary" believers.

If one does this, however, one enfeebles the Sermon on the Mount. What Jesus demands in the Sermon (and therefore also in the Beatitudes, as the overture to the Sermon) is valid for *all* people who wish to enter the kingdom of God - for you and me as well. This applies everywhere and always - not only within the walls of the church. What Christ demands here is simply the radical, perfect application of the love commandment - the heart of all the commandments - which may never rest on a foundation of non-activity.

When Christ pronounced his ninefold *makarios!* on the beautiful spring morning in Galilee, there weren't only people from the vicinity among his audience. Many had come from far away - as far away as the province of Judea and the city of Jerusalem to the south. But from even further south, from Idumea, east from Decapolis and north from Tyre and Sidon, foreigners and heathens came (Matthew 4:24-25; Mark 3:7-12 and Luke 6:17-19). They were all driven by their quest for happiness: sick people suffering from all kinds of diseases, mentally deranged people and people caught in the cruel grip of Satan.

And - Christ pronounces them blessed! This applies not only to his own nation, the Jews. He includes the strangers, the heathens.

The echoes of the ninefold *makarios!* against the mountain near Capernaum, nearly two thousand years ago, still resounds today at the southern tip of Africa. We still have to read it today as if it were directed to each of us personally.

What about?

In Christ's initial preaching in Galilee He dealt with the Kingdom of God and the fact that the kingdom of God was *near* (Matthew 4:17). In the Sermon on the Mount, held during his continued appearance in Galilee, the stress was on the kingdom of God and its *justice*.

The whole Sermon can be divided logically into two sections:

1. Matthew 5:3-12: The *Beatitudes*, the preaching of the *blessedness* of the kingdom of God.
2. Matthew 5:7-27: The *commandments*, the preaching of the *justice* of the kingdom of heaven.

The section on the Beatitudes can be divided as follows:

- a. *Heading* (verses 1-3): the kingdom of God is promised to the poor, to those who know their need of God.
- b. The *shape of the poor of spirit* (who know their need of God) in their relationship to God and their neighbour (v. 4-9):

to God

1. sorrowing
3. hungry and thirsty
5. pure of heart

to their neighbour

2. of a gentle spirit
4. compassionate
6. peacemakers

c. *Subscript* (v. 10-12)

The citizens of the kingdom (who know their need of God - the poor of spirit - and who resemble the traits drawn in verses 4-9) will be persecuted in the world. Yet the promise of the kingdom of God remains (first beatitude).

The section on the *commandments* (5:13 - 7:27), the *justice* of the kingdom, can also be sub-divided into three sections:

a. The *necessity* of justice or good works (5:13-16);

b. A *closer explication* of what justice (good works) is, under the following points:

* the *criterion* for good works (5:17-48);

* the *motive* for good works (6:1-18);

* the *radical surrender* demanded by justice (6:19-34);

* the *code of behaviour* towards the neighbour in the fulfilment of justice (7:1-12).

c. A *postscript* (7:13-27) which, with reference to eternal life and damnation, contains a strong injunction to *do* the justice contained in the sermon.

If we say that the beatitudes are the proclamation of *salvation* of the kingdom, and the rest of the Sermon the preaching of the *commandments*, this should not be taken wrongly.

The beatitudes themselves, apart from (complete) *gift*, also contain (utter) *duty*, a call to conversion and to justice. We should at most be able to say that in the beatitudes the gifts of the kingdom predominate.

The scribes and the Pharisees obstructed the access to God, his Law and his will. With their thousand and one man-made commandments they resorted to the letter of the law, but the commandment itself lost all its power. If they knew anything about love, it was about self-love. The justice of the kingdom of Christ goes much further than that of the scribes and

the Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). It demands *perfect* fulfilment of the law (Matthew 5:48).

Christ therefore does not preach a "softer" option than the law of the Old Testament. It is not easier than that of the Pharisees, but rather harder: the law has to be fulfilled not only in its outward manifestation, but also in the core of the law, in the demand for love of God and neighbour. Nothing less than perfect love is demanded!

Whoever is honest will ask "But who can then be blessed?" (Matthew 10:25). Christ's response is that one is blessed when one realizes that the law cannot be fulfilled out of one's own works, but only once one realizes one's dependence on Him who has come to fulfil the Law - for one's sake. Christ was perfect in justice: He observed God's law fully. This justice now becomes part of us if we are aware of our spiritual poverty and do not think, like the Pharisees, that we abound in good works.

Great love is demanded in the Sermon on the Mount, but this is only because God revealed his love so abundantly through Christ. (Cf. Luke 7:36-50: "...her great love proves that her many sins have been forgiven.") The secret of this love is therefore lodged with God, and not with man.

The grace and the commandment, the gift and the duty, are inextricably linked. Cf. for example Matthew 5:14-16: *gift*: "You are the light of the world" - not on account of what you have *done* but on account of what you have *received*; *demand*: "Let your light therefore shine before the people" - the light that you have received you also have to reflect back on to the world.

It is wrong, as so many try to do, to limit this validity of the Sermon on the Mount and to allege that Christ does not here demand complete and perfect fulfilment of the law (justice). He came to fulfil the law and not to dissolve it. And He expects the same of his followers. He suffered and died to enable them to do this!

How?

With this question we mean: What are the beatitudes like? How have they been composed?

The beatitudes are (as much of the wisdom literature of the time) written in the so-called mashal style. This style has the following characteristics:

- * an attractive, concrete, well-delineated style of expression;
- * a witty and piquant style of expression, involving the unexpected, such as unexpected syntax, puns and hyperbolic expressions;
- * stress on one specific side of the issue without seeming to worry whether there was another side to the issue, so that one gets the impression at times that there are contradictions.

The basic intention was that one should be stimulated to reflect. Compare for example Proverbs 27:17: "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens the wit of another" - the listener is prompted to make the link.

The beatitudes also consist of a number of "riddles" which hold surprises. After each beatitude one first has to wait: "Blest are the poor" and now the listeners first have to wonder how this can be, before the answer is given by Christ.

Thus each beatitude is a riddle which forces one to reflect before coming up with an unexpected solution in the form of a surprise.

Each beatitude therefore consists of two parts, viz.

- * How blest are the sorrowful...
- * for they shall find consolation.

In each beatitude we can therefore ask:

- * *Who* are they?
- * *Why* are they blest?

It is important to remember that Christ as *King* is here teaching the multitude about *his Kingdom*. The concept *Kingdom of God* (the essence of the preaching of John the Baptist and Christ and in fact of the whole Bible) includes three facets:

- * the *fact* that God is King;
- * the *realm* (subjects or citizens) and
- * the *blessings* enjoyed in this realm.

In the beatitudes the concern is especially with the last two facets: the subjects of God's realm are blessed, because they share in his kingdom.

It is important to note that the first parts of the beatitudes all deal with just one class of people: the subjects of this kingdom. The poor in spirit mentioned first in the first beatitude, are described further in the subsequent beatitudes. It is not true that they are all random beatitudes promising all sorts of things to a number of people with certain characteristics. Blessing is therefore also not given only to those who suffer (spiritual) poverty, and so forth. The beatitudes *all together* sketch an image of the subjects of this kingdom.

It is also important to keep in mind that Christ in his beatitudes did not simply praise those who are *innately* kind and soft-hearted and peace-loving. The concern here is specifically with the subjects of this kingdom, the believers, the Christians. It will emerge even further that no man has these qualities out of himself (in terms of character, temperament, aptitude). These are the fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit, fully and completely!

Also the second part of the beatitudes ("because ...") deal *together* with the blessings of the one and the same kingdom. The first beatitude (= the heading) says: "The kingdom of God is theirs" - and this is repeated in the last beatitude. In between these two the different blessings of the kingdom are promised.

The answers to the two questions posed with each beatitude (*Who?* and *Why?*) are therefore

- * the *subjects* of the kingdom, and
- * they are blessed because they share in the wonderful *blessings* of the kingdom of God.

By whom?

Although here we have the most obvious of all answers, it is necessary to be explicit. A kingdom with subjects and blessings, but without a king, is not possible. The fact of God's kingship; his dominion, is the most important facet in the understanding of the concept of "kingdom of God" in the Bible.

Here it is Christ, the King, who outlines the characters of his subjects and of the blessings of his kingdom. It is not a prophet or a messenger, but the King Himself. (Somebody has said that in the Sermon on the Mount we have a King who reads out the constitution of his country to the subjects Himself.)

We should not forget this in the exposition of the beatitudes which follows. Neither should we forget that what He says is true, for behind each beatitude stands Christ, our Saviour.

Coherence

We cannot stress enough that the beatitudes all together deal with the subjects and the blessings of the kingdom of God. The concern is not with individuals with certain natural characteristics (such as caring, peace-loving, etc.). Each beatitude outlines different characteristics of the Christian. The believer has to carry *all* these traits and not only some.

Together with this goes the fact that the various beatitudes are also mutually linked. There is a logical coherence: the one builds on the other. The totality cannot be seen in isolation from the parts, and vice versa.

Among the many efforts to determine the structure of the beatitudes we only mention the following two examples:

We have already offered the first division before. According to this the first beatitude (poverty of spirit) is the *heading* and the final one (about the persecuted) is the *conclusion*. The first (verse 3) and the eighth (verse 10) close with the same promise about being blessed. The first statement relates to the beatitudes which follow (the blessings of the kingdom are described in more detail). The final beatitude (verse 10) relates to the

preceding. (All the blessings are grouped together in the one concept of the kingdom of God).

The remaining six beatitudes, which are enclosed by the first and the eighth, consist of three pairs of two beatitudes each. In the case of each pair the first describes the Christian's relationship to God, and the second outlines his relationship to the neighbour. One could also say that the first sketches his *inner life* and the second the *social life*. Or: the first member of each pair states who the Christian *is*, while the second states what he *does*. To summarise:

The poor in spirit (verse 3, old translation [King James])

in their inner life

in their social life

sorrowful (v. 4)

thus

of a gentle spirit (v.5)

hungry and thirsty (v.6)

thus

show mercy (v.7)

pure of heart (v.8)

thus

peacemakers (v.9).

The second method of division one could explain by way of the example of a mountain. With the first three beatitudes we scale the one side of the mountain. With the fourth we are at the summit. The following three beatitudes outline the mountain path on the other side, while the final one (the 8th) brings us to the deep, dark valley at the foot of the mountain.

In the first three beatitudes the *needs* of the Christian (poor, sorrowful, gentle of spirit) are outlined. The fourth beatitude (hunger and thirst) show the *fulfilment* of the needs ("shall be satisfied"). The subsequent three beatitudes indicate the *result*: compassionate, pure of heart and peacemaker. The final two beatitudes (verses 10-12) deal with the *consequences* for the Christian, viz. that he will have to endure persecution, insult and false witness. Here we reach the deep dark valley at the foot of the mountain...

We have to be careful not to force the beatitudes too rigidly into a scheme devised by man. On the other hand it is a good thing to remember that they are not simply loose statements but reveal a coherent whole, because they follow upon each other.

The more we study the beatitudes, the more wonderful they become. This is not only a rising line, however. Because each beatitude forces us to do self-scrutiny, there is also a line that goes down: the more we read, the more are we aware of the fact that we are failing hopelessly. Each beatitude also holds within itself a condemnation. (Cf. the four-times repeated *alas!*, Luke 6:24-26.)

As against those who realize how dependent they are upon Christ we have the people (such as the Pharisees) who insist that they are spiritually rich; against those who seek justice, there are those who feel that because of their good works they do not need God's justice; against those who mourn their own imperfection, there are those who rejoice in their own perfection; against those who are persecuted, insulted and slandered, there are those of whom people say only good things, because they are not truly children of God but go along with worldly ways.

For all these people Luke's "Alas!" is the only response.

As with the whole of Scripture Christ's wonderful beatitudes are also like a two-edged sword. They both bless and condemn. They penetrate the outward appearance and judge our deepest intentions and thoughts.

Keeping this in mind, we can now look separately at each of Christ's great surprises.

Chapter 30

THE POOR - WHO OWN EVERYTHING!

(Matthew 5:3)

Jesus sits down and begins to teach (Matthew 5:1). In the East it was the custom for the teacher to sit and the audience to stand - the opposite of our custom today. "...He began to address them, and this is the teaching He gave ..."

The formal expression indicates that something special is going to be taught, something which the audience had not heard before.

The King will teach the multitude - Jews and heathens - about his Kingdom. He will teach them that if God is King in one's life, one will be blessed.

The promise precedes the demand, however. It is not man's works, but God's work which predominates in this Kingdom. In the first place the concern is with redemption, joy and blessing. (More formally expressed: the imperative mode of the commandment rests in the indicative mode of grace.) For that reason no one can enter the kingdom other than through the gateway of grace.

Over this gateway is written "Blessed are those who know their need of God". (In the old translation, this was the poor of spirit.) This first *makarios!* is the inscription over all the beatitudes, and tells us who are the subjects of the kingdom, and the rest of the beatitudes describe these subjects of the kingdom more fully.

We pose two questions:

Who are those in need of God (poor in Spirit)? And what does it mean?

Why are they blessed?

The poor in spirit (those in need of God)

The problem here is that in the corresponding verse in Luke (6:20) there is mention only of the poor (those in need), not the poor *in spirit*.

Does this mean that all the poor, without distinction, should be blessed? And in terms of Matthew, what is meant by "poor in spirit"?

In the past most commentaries tended to understand this expression purely in the spiritual sense. One would therefore take it to mean those who are aware of their sin and despair and who feel poor in the sight of God.

Today we find, in various theologies of liberation, that the other extreme obtains. They want to deduce from Luke 6:20 that Christ unqualifiedly sides with the materially impoverished.

What should we understand under the poor, those in need? If we study this concept in the rest of Scripture, we find that it is an encompassing concept. The distinction which we make between spiritually and materially poor was unknown to the Easterner.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for a poor person means oppressed person, somebody who is persecuted and is the victim of great misery, having no right and no helper in the world. Poverty did not only indicate material poverty. Material poverty created the awareness in the Israelite that he had been forsaken by God (cf. Psalm 73). Poverty was seen as a punishment for sin. Thus the word "poor" also obtained a religious connotation - quite the opposite from our usage.

In earlier times there were not many poor people in Israel. Since the exile, however, many had been impoverished. In the time of Christ they were not only oppressed by the Romans but also exploited by their own people (the tax-collectors). Among the multitude addressed by Him on this day, there would not have been many wealthy men. The first beatitude was therefore very accurate, and must have sounded wonderful to the ears of these people who were not only poverty-stricken but were intensely aware of it.

The Greek word used here really means *beggar*, this is, somebody who is dependent on the financial help of another. Such a person would not only be poor in terms of worldly possessions, but would also be an outcast. When the term "poor" is used here, therefore, the intention is to indicate a person who is so badly off in material and financial terms that he also suffers spiritually as a result. Poverty has a terribly depressive effect.

Matthew as it were leaves out the cause (poverty) and notes the spiritual effects for man. The addition of "spirit", however, is not a limitation of the concept of poor only to spiritual poverty, but rather a reinforcement of it.

A poor man then - as today - was totally vulnerable to those in power and those with wealth. He was totally dependent on their wishes and whims. He had nothing to trust in or to be proud of - he was nothing in his own eyes. This is what Matthew means with "poor in spirit".

The Pharisees and the scribes had a great deal to brag about. They regarded God as somebody more or less like a banker situated in heaven. Daily He would note down the good works of those under the Law. Once a year, on New Year's Day, a provisional account was drawn up and credit and debit carefully balanced. They believed that there were three books: the first contained the names of those most deeply sunk in debt towards God; in the second those whose good works and sins balanced, and in the third those who were perfect like the Pharisees who had a healthy credit balance. They therefore saw to it that they did a great many (superfluous) good works.

Christ came and offered the beatitudes to the poor who had no cent of credit in heaven, and could only throw themselves on his mercy. The "Alas!" is said for the Pharisees - convinced that they were rich.

We can therefore recapitulate this by saying that:

1. Christ does not offer the beatitudes to the poor *as such*, without distinction. The Bible nowhere teaches that poverty as such is good or praiseworthy. Poverty holds no intrinsic value and does not bring one nearer to the kingdom of God. Many poor people are not humbled by their poverty, but rather rebel against God.

2. Christ also does not condemn wealth as such. Scripture, however, is critical of wealth, because it is so often gained wrongfully and used selfishly. (The Alas! expressed by Luke is applicable to them.) One also learns that a rich man will have a hard time entering heaven, because wealth tends to make a man so independent that in time he will forget his dependence on God. For most rich people it is difficult to stand in front of God like a beggar!

3. "Poverty of spirit" also does not indicate - as so many people think - those who are mentally retarded. It also does not mean self-effacing, nervous or weak in the sense of being without courage.

"Poverty has to be sought within ourselves" (Calvin). We have to be cleansed of all pride and self-esteem and be convinced that we are as nothing in the sight of God. The beggar is small and insignificant before God, and in his craving for help and mercy he is the true poor. Only he who regards himself as lowly and trusts in the grace of God is *poor* in spirit.

The beatitude therefore condemns every thought that man can do something worthwhile of his own volition, because this would demand a total rejection of pride, self-assurance and confidence in the sight of God.

For that reason this first beatitude is so basic, a superscript. There is nobody in the kingdom of God who is not poor in spirit. Nobody can share in this kingdom if he has not first humbled himself and come to a full realization of his utter insignificance in the eyes of God. This poverty, the emptiness, the insignificance, is the true condition for being filled with the joy of the kingdom!

Why are they blessed?

The stress in the Greek lies on "they". But why? Because the poor are rich, tremendously rich. They possess a kingdom - the kingdom of heaven!

This should be reread to penetrate to us fully, for it is too good to be true. Christ's first surprise made the audience of the time catch their breath, and we should do no less. If the Saviour blesses you, you are blessed. You need not doubt it for a moment. If He says the kingdom belongs to you, it does.

They are the poor who are in reality very rich, because they are subjects of the kingdom, and have the full redemption of Christ: forgiveness of sin and all the other wealth of gifts given us by Christ.

The term kingdom of *heaven* does not mean that the kingdom will only be established in heaven one day and that the poor will only be blessed there. Christ says in the first beatitude (and this is repeated in the last one) that the kingdom of heaven already belongs to them: they *are* already blessed,

it is not a case that they *will* be blessed. The kingdom of God is not simply future music - in Christ it assumed the present time-frame, and we already own what one day will be fully ours.

The term "kingdom of *heaven*" indicates the *origin* of the kingdom. It does not emanate from the sinful earth but from heaven. It is not established through man's works but through a divine deed. (Luke in 6:20 speaks of the Kingdom of *God*, which means the same thing.)

These poor are now already owners - and will one day be such in perfection - of a perfect and indestructible kingdom. They can therefore rightly be called happy and blessed, for outside this kingdom there can be no true blessedness.

But: without true poverty you cannot share in the ownership of the kingdom. Somebody once said that once one has read the first beatitude, one would want to remain poor.

Do you belong to the ranks of the poor?

The most wonderful for me is that poverty is not the *condition* and the kingdom the *reward*. We also cannot give rise to true poverty, the utter dependence on God, ourselves. That too is grace! All that we can do is to pray to God so that he will keep us humble and small through the work of his Spirit. As Totius, the poet and Bible translator said on his deathbed: "All, all through the grace of God ..."

Chapter 31

THE SORROWFUL - WHO WILL FIND CONSOLATION!

(Matthew 5:4)

"How blest are the sorrowful; they shall find consolation."

According to the world this is a silly statement. It is, however, the logical consequence of the preceding beatitude. The poor in spirit, who realize how hopeless their situation is in the sight of God, cannot be other than sorrowful about it. The materially poor who are also the victims of spiritual poverty sigh together with the whole of creation.

What are they mourning about?

The word translated here with sorrowful (new translation) and mourn (old translation) indicates a quiet sorrow and not a loud expression of grief.

Personal sin is perhaps the most important cause of sorrow. Many Biblical figures are an example of this for us. Think of the many expressions of Paul, where he mourns his sinful nature, and yearns to be released from his sinful existence. He also mourns about his ability to do evil and not good, even though he might sincerely want to do good.

The true believer, however, cannot stop here. He also sees the same sins being committed by others. He is worried about the corruption and the injustice in society. When he sees world events, he mourns with so many who have been oppressed, who are hungry and persecuted.

In this the Christian is the true follower of Christ. He weeps at the grave of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35). He also weeps about Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). What is striking is that we do read that Christ at times was tired, upset, hungry and thirsty, but we do not read anywhere that He laughed. The suffering and the need of the whole of creation which He had to bear rested so heavily on Him that in all probability He would appear to be older than He really was. (Cf. John 8:57 - the Jews thought that He was about fifty, while He was in fact in his early thirties.) This does not mean, however, that he was morbid, sombre and brusque. We cannot, from the fact that it

is nowhere said that He laughed, deduce that He never had a smile on his mouth. (The stupidities and silly actions of many with whom He came into contact probably often made Him smile wryly.) It is also mentioned that He experienced joy, and that He served his Father with joy (cf. John 15:11). It gave Him quiet joy to be fulfilling the will of God.

This warns us that a Christian, in view of his own misery and the universal lostness of creation, cannot simply live in a superficially jovial manner. Who can be glad when knowing of the wrath of the almighty God?

This quiet grief is not simply grief about sin. The Greek word for mourning has a much wider meaning. It also includes the misery and grief suffered by a disciple of Christ - because he is a disciple. The final beatitude (blessed are those who are persecuted) is also applicable here. There Christ talks of persecution explicitly, because the persecuted do what is right. It is also persecution "for My sake". We therefore cannot simply say that Christ blesses all the percecuted without distinction - just as He did not do this in the case of all the poor.

Does this now mean that a Christian should be a stern-faced killjoy? There are of course many Christians who are depressing, stiff, nasty and even unpleasant. In earlier times many true believers were convinced that it was absolutely unseemly for a Christian to laugh. A friend recently told me that his uncle would pencil out all the laughing faces from the photographs in a newspaper before beginning to read it!

Perhaps you know the anecdote about the elder who had to meet a minister he had not met before at the station. He finally accosted a tall, thin man with an expression of pain on his face and asked whether he was Reverend So and So. The answer he got was to the point: "I am not a minister - I simply have an ulcer ..."

One can, however, go too far in a reaction to superficial wordly expressions of joy. I wonder how many of the long-faced Christians look the way they do because they are mourning about their sins...

No, when we read the Bible, we find in many believers the laugh covering the tears. The greatest misery and need can never dry up the stream of true joy in the life of the Christian. The great missionary apostle Paul is a true example for all of us. Under the greatest suffering he never lost joy,

and from the prison he can call out: "Rejoice in the Lord I repeat, rejoice in the Lord" (Philippians 4:4).

"True grief brings true joy" (Calvin). The secret of this joy is given by the Lord Jesus Christ in this same beatitude.

Why those who mourn (are sorrowful) are blessed

It is those who mourn who are blessed. This is Christ's second surprise. It is already unusual for the poor to be blessed, but for a mourner to be blessed is equally incomprehensible.

The secret: they will find consolation.

Who will console them? How can they be consoled? There are many consolers and many ways to console. You have seen them and the way they console. Mostly the consolation is thin: "Never mind, you haven't lost *everything*. Enjoy the good, while you still can". Or: "Every cloud has a silver lining". This is the same kind of consolation given to Job so many years ago, and which caused him to say: "I have heard such things often before, you who make trouble, all of you, with every breath ..." (Job 16:2).

The word *console* has to do with trust. To be consoled, then, means to be firmly grounded.

For that reason there is only one who can offer real consolation, and that is God. The prophecy of Isaiah is filled with it: "Comfort, comfort my people - it is the voice of your God" (Isaiah 40:1). In 66:12, 13 God promises that He will console Israel as a mother does her infant. The proximity of the mother makes the child feel safe and sure, because he has somebody to whom he belongs, who cares for him.

Who can fail to think here of the very first question in the Heidelberg Catechism: "What is our only consolation in life and in death?" - and the answer is that we belong to Somebody, our Saviour!

When our Saviour blessed us, He already had in mind the greatest consoler, the Holy Spirit. (The word for *console* used in this beatitude has the same root as the word *paraclete*, which is used for the Holy Spirit.)

Shortly before his Crucifixion Jesus promised that the Consoler would take his place (John 16:7).

This Consoler came with Pentecost. He came to live with us always. With his coming the kingdom of God was established upon earth. He works in the hearts of men and makes them obedient subjects of the kingdom. It is only He who can truly console the grieving - it is not without reason that Christ calls Him the Consoler.

We saw at the beginning that Christ (in the first beatitude) promised the kingdom to his children, and then in the subsequent beatitudes He promised the various blessings of the kingdom. Here we now have the first blessing, a Person, God Himself. It is He who creates the qualities in us which allow Christ to speak the beatitudes: love, peace, tenderness of heart, etc. (cf. Galatians 5:22).

Christ's "they *shall find* consolation" has therefore already been fulfilled at Pentecost. There is an even richer fulfilment which waits for us at the second coming. Then all causes for grief will be finally removed. Then there will not be, any longer, misery, grief and pain, because God Himself will dry our tears (Revelation 21:4).

The question for our conscience

This beatitude too sets us before the personal question: Do I know grief towards God?

There is also a grief of this world. Many unbelievers are sorry about their wrongful deeds. Perhaps they are afraid of the consequences or ashamed because their deeds have been revealed.

There is a great difference, however, between being sorry and having repentance. Being sorry involves despair, such as that of Judas Iscariot (Matthew 27:3-5). This brings no improvement, however. Sorrow about our sins cannot be borne without the Lord, and leads to conversion. Sin which has been confessed is sin which is being struggled against. Think of David (2 Samuel 12:13), Peter (Matthew 26:75) and the tax-collector (Luke 18:13): "O God, have mercy upon a poor sinner".

Because man fell into sin, there is no other way to rejoicing than the one through the dale of mourning, of true repentance and conversion. The old man has to die first and be buried before the new man can be reborn in joy!

Have you walked this way yet? Do you walk it anew every day? Then you are *makarios*! in the eyes of Christ.

Chapter 32

THE MEEK - WHO INHERIT THE EARTH!

(Matthew 5:5)

"Blest are those of a gentle spirit, they shall have the earth for their possession". In the old translation, this reads: *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth".*

This is Christ's third great surprise. The meek, those of gentle spirit, will possess the earth. This is clearly in contrast to what we see every day, where the world does not belong to the meek at all, but rather to the brutal, the powerful and the rich exploiters.

What could Jesus mean by this?

Who are the gentle of spirit?

Words become so bereft of meaning through over-use that the original meaning disappears from sight. The result is that we often attach a quite different meaning to words to what they have in the Bible.

A clear example of this is the concept and the word "meekness", "gentleness of spirit". Who are the meek, the gentle of spirit addressed here by the Lord? Are they "nice" people, soft and pliant, easy to compromise, easy to get along with, never saying a harsh word?

In this sense it would mean weakness. In the Bible, however, this quality is accompanied by great strength and authority. The meek, the gentle of spirit, is somebody who keeps on maintaining truth, even though he should die for it. Somebody has said of the martyrs: "They were *meek*, but they were never *weak*".

But what is this quality then? I think we have to see it as a specific attitude that you have towards yourself and others.

One cannot be meek when he does not regard himself as poor and miserable in the sight of God and if he is not intensely grieved by it. There

is an unbreakable link between this and the previous two beatitudes. The fruit of meekness can only grow on the tree of the poverty of spirit and the grief of the heart.

This beatitude goes further than the other two, however. Our relationship to our neighbour is also involved here, or, more accurately, his relationship to us. To concede to myself that I am a poor miserable human being, is still possible, if not easy. It is much harder to let anyone else say this, however! It is so easy to say: "I do have some pride left, you know."

This, however, is precisely what meekness means - to be the least. Meekness is humility.

Many Biblical figures can serve as examples here. Abraham allows his cousin Lot to choose first and to take over the best part of the land. Moses too was, according to Numbers 12:3, the humblest man on earth - towards his envious brother and sister. Look at David's actions towards Saul - even while he was aware of the fact that God had rejected Saul and that he would become king in his place. Stephen prays, while dying horribly, that the Lord should forgive his murderers. Paul too had to be the least.

Our greatest example, however, is the Person who speaks the beatitude. In Matthew 11:29 He says: "... for I am gentle and humble-hearted". How much did He not have to endure false accusations, sarcasm, mockery, contempt, hatred, persecution! For our sake He was willing to take on the shape of a slave, and when none of the disciples would demean himself to wash the feet of the others, He did so!

A meek person, in the Biblical sense of the word, is not a weakling. It is simply a person without self-interest and without interest in personal glory, somebody who is not sensitive about himself but rather surprised that people still treat him so well.

How is this possible? Because meekness, gentleness of spirit, still has another meaning which reveals a specific relationship towards God.

In the Old Testament the word literally means oppressed or pushed. The meek is the person whose nature is soft, he allows it to be bent, twisted, shaped and managed by the will of God. The meek is somebody who bends to the will of God - and he expects this of his neighbour too. He is

tolerant when he himself is involved, but totally intolerant when the service of God is involved. Think about the meek Moses: tolerant towards his envious brother and sister, but totally unbending when the honour of Yahwe is at stake. Christ is also like this: in the verses preceding his claim that He is gentle and meek, He curses the unrepentant cities.

Why are they blessed?

The meek are happy, because they are heirs. The word *inherit* means that they already really own what is promised to them. Although the inheritance which has been made is not yet legally in his possession, he knows that it is his in terms of the testament. Although the unbelievers get more and more power on earth, the believers are the real owners of what is still now in foreign hands.

Their inheritance is the earth.

In each beatitude something of the glory of the kingdom is promised. But what is the link between the kingdom and the earth? Here we see clearly that the kingdom of God is not simply a spiritual kingdom which has no link with earthly reality. The kingdom which came with Christ's advent and the coming of the Holy Spirit to the *old earth*, and which is still in the process of coming, will have come in its full glory on the *new earth*.

According to my own understanding of the Bible in the final consummation Christians will not be in heaven - as is often believed. No, the earth (us) will not go to heaven, but the reverse: heaven will descend to the earth (cf. Revelation 21:1). God Himself, our King, has a home among men then. He will live with us (Revelation 21:3). For that reason the glory of the Kingdom will come in all its perfection. What a wonderful promise to the meek: Together with God, they may live in the new world - surely there is no richer inheritance!

And because this new paradise will not have been created because of human activity - it comes from Above - it is not a mere utopian vision. It comes, surely and certainly. Christ Himself signed in blood the testament in accordance with which the meek become his heirs.

For that reason we can already be happy and satisfied, even though at first glance we might seem to possess little. Even though we might look

like beggars, rejected and poor people, we know that we are in fact wealthy.

Who would not want to be meek, gentle of spirit, upon reading this beatitude? We can not, however, make ourselves gentle and meek, for this is the work of the Holy Spirit alone (cf. Galatians 5:22). We can pray the Holy Spirit, however, to bring forth this lovely fruit in us too.

As the anointed with the Spirit, as Christians, we have no excuse if we do not have true meekness, gentleness of spirit.

Chapter 33

THE HUNGRY - WHO SHALL BE SATISFIED!

(Matthew 5:6)

"How blest are those who hunger and thirst....they shall be satisfied."

Somebody who maintains that Christendom is a colourless and uninteresting religion should read the beatitudes. We have not properly recovered from one surprise before being stunned by the next!

In this fourth beatitude there is talk of hungry and thirsty people. The verbs which are used for hunger and thirst indicate a very strong desire. In reality we should talk of a devouring hunger and a burning thirst. Only people who have really suffered hunger and thirst can know how intense such an experience can be. When one is truly hungry or thirsty no other thoughts enter one's mind. These are also not desires of a passing nature, because they do not disappear until they have been satisfied.

Once again it does not cover all people who desire food and water. This beatitude is easier than the other two (the poor and the mourning) because it tells us exactly what the hunger and thirst are for.

As in the previous two beatitudes we set two questions again:

* *What* is it that is being hungered for?

* *Why* are they blessed?

Hunger and thirst to do what God wants

The object of the hunger and thirst in this case is not food and drink, for it is a different kind of food and drink that is wanted: the desire to do God's will. The Authorized Version says: "...after righteousness ...", while the New English Bible says "...to see right prevail ..." (According to the original Greek the explicit expression is "justice/righteousness".)

What justice is meant here?

We have already seen above that the beatitudes oppose the basic points of departure of the Pharisaic view of life. This emerges clearly once more. The Pharisees and scribes do not desire the righteousness of which Christ speaks here. They are replete with their own righteousness. For that reason they do not have a need for somebody to bring them beatitudes - they pronounce their own salvation! Christ, however, says to the multitude that if their righteousness is not more abundant than that of the Pharisees, they will never enter the kingdom of God.

The righteousness of which Christ speaks here is the righteousness of the Kingdom, and not of the Pharisees.

What is the difference?

The needy (the poor, the sorrowing, the gentle of the spirit and the hungry) have an urgent need to do what is right. We can only discover what is right from the law of God. Whoever hungers and thirst after righteousness, therefore, is somebody who strives with all his heart to arrange his life in accordance with God's revelation of his law. A just man, according to Scripture, is one who obeys God's law. If one stands in the right relationship towards God's law, then one's relationship with God is also right. This is the most fundamental hunger and thirst after justice: to set right one's relationship with God.

To long for justice, righteousness, is therefore far more than simply being moral, civilized or kind.

But how does this differ from the righteousness of the Pharisees? Among self-satisfied Pharisees there is no hunger, no thirsting, any more after true righteousness. They are already replete, filled with their own righteousness. Is the law of God not central in their lives? But then, do they truly *love* the God who gave the law? Or is their fulfilment of the Law merely a cold formality?

The poor, the sorrowing, the hungry realize that they can never really comply with the right of God. Because they realize that they have little that is deserving, they strive desperately, hungrily, for righteousness. In themselves they find nothing which can still the hunger and slake the thirst.

They are the blessed

It is striking that Christ says that those are blessed who are *hungering and thirsting* for righteousness, and not those who *have* righteousness. This indicates that this justice is not something that can be obtained, but which is granted. As in the previous beatitudes we find evidence again here of a wonderful *gift* of the kingdom of God.

Those who really hunger have their desire fulfilled - not with a surrogate but with *true* righteousness.

Behind each beatitude there is the Redeemer, the Saviour. The mountain of beatitudes cannot be considered without the hill of Golgotha. In this case too Christ attained true righteousness on the cross, so that through Him the kingdom of justice has come to the earth. He fulfilled the law of God as demanded of mankind. And through hungering and thirsting after Him we get to share in His justice.

For that reason we are always invited, when commemorating his suffering and death, "Come all who are thirsty, come fetch water; come you who have no food, buy corn and eat ... come and buy, not for money, not for price" (Isaiah 55:1). His body was broken to satisfy our hunger and to slake our thirst. Whoever has drunk of this water will never be thirsty again (John 4:13). "A draught from the water-springs of life will be my free gift to the thirsty" (Revelation 21:6b).

The promise given us here by Christ has therefore already been fulfilled. The only "condition" to share in this is to desire it ardently - with all you being. What can be simpler?

Let us note the order again. One does not seek happiness. In the first place one seeks righteousness, and then one receives not only justice but also happiness.

Sanctification

Righteous in Christ! As hunger and thirst for food and water never cease, so hunger and thirst for righteousness also will not cease. We have been sanctified in Christ, but the process of sanctification never ceases.

The hungry and the thirsty are not without sin - they are rather keenly aware of their many failings. They are aware each day of their struggle against evil and their desire for evil. Once they have got to the Righteous, however, they love the law of God and hate sin.

It is precisely at this point that self-investigation is essential. This beatitude tests the level of our lives as believers fundamentally. Are we worried about our righteousness in the sight of God? Do we see through our false personal sense of righteousness? Do we realize that we will be lost for ever if we do not take refuge in true righteousness daily, because then we live under the threat of the wrath of God.

Are we agonisingly aware of the fact that there is so little righteousness, justice, in the world? Does it hurt us deep down when we see how contempt is poured on the commandments of God in this world? What do we *do* about it?

The Bible is very clear about the fact that in terms of righteousness we should not think only of the relationship we have with God. If we say that we are righteous, that we know Christ, and at the same time oppress and hate, exploit, cheat and abuse our neighbour, we are hypocrites and liars. Righteousness in our relationship to God which does not lead to righteousness in our actions towards our neighbours is not true, saving righteousness.

Hunger and thirst are elementary urges, but they are among the strongest urges. They can absorb one so completely that nothing else seems important. A person who is really hungry or thirsty is desperate, because he realizes that his life is at stake. He has to find food and water - or perish.

A person's longing for a loved one can literally devour him ...

Is this typical of our relationship to God and his law? It should not manifest now and then, but every day.

If you can answer affirmatively to this, you might be one of the people whom Christ called "Blest are you"

Chapter 34

THE MERCIFUL - WHO RECEIVE MERCY!

(Matthew 5:7)

"How blest are those who show mercy; mercy shall be shown to them."

In the first four beatitudes the Christian's needs were outlined: poor, sorrowful, insignificant, hungry and thirsty. The fourth beatitude already contains the *fulfilment* of the needs: God fulfils these needs.

After the arduous journey we now find ourselves on the top of the mountain. The meal which we could eat there has strengthened and sustained us. Now we have to tackle the downward slope. Often this is more difficult and dangerous than climbing up, and this is so in this case. In the three beatitudes which follow, the *results* of the fulfilment with God's righteousness are compassion, purity, peacemaking. The *effects* or consequences, however, are even more fundamental: derision, insult, persecution ...

The first result of repletion with what one deserves in Christ is compassion, the showing of mercy. Where, in the foregoing beatitudes the stress was mainly on man's personal need, the relationship to the neighbour becomes prominent here.

Once again two questions:

* *Who* are the merciful? And

* *why* are they blest?

The merciful

Does this mean anybody who has an eye for the need of another? No, here we also have to keep the context in mind. It is those who are poor, sorrowing, gentle of heart, who crave for justice, who are also merciful.

This beatitude is the logical result of the foregoing one. God gave us mercy in Christ. As unjust people we could be declared righteous. The terrible

cup which Christ had to drink became, for us, a beaker of righteousness. Whoever has once tasted of God's mercy can do no other than to be merciful also.

The term "mercy" (or "compassion") is an expression which could be used in the application of justice. In Antiquity the accused could plead with his judges for extenuation, for mercy. The judge could also extend mercy.

Thus God's mercy also means reprieve, acquittal, forgiveness of the death penalty. Therefore the word is used in the Old Testament mainly with reference to God. In the New Testament it only occurs once apart from here in the beatitudes, and then in relation to Christ. When Christ therefore uses the word here, He immediately evokes in his listeners the idea that somebody is blessed when he is merciful *like God*, Who gives us, undeserving, total righteousness.

What is mercy or compassion? Do we find it in somebody who is simply amenable, tolerant, sympathetic? Is it an easy-going person? This is what is often colloquially understood under the term.

God is merciful, but not in the sense that He overlooks sins. He is *also* just. We have just learnt about his righteousness in the previous beatitude: Christ had to die in our place to pay for our lack of righteousness. In the fact that it was *his Son* who died for us, however, we see that his righteousness is always accompanied by love and compassion.

This makes me think of the story of the king who promulgated a law with the warning that the transgressor of the law would lose both eyes. When his own son became the first transgressor, he was in a terrible predicament. If he was a just king, he had to make justice prevail without consideration of the person in question. At the same time it was his son, whom he loved. In order to comply with the principle of justice, he decided to have one of his son's eyes put out - and one of his own!

We should also never practise compassion or mercy at the cost of obedience to the law of God. We have to have great compassion for people who have fallen in sin, but never in the sense that their deeds are approved or condoned.

But there are more traits of true compassion. If two people do the same thing, it is not identical. All compassion is not the compassion that Christ speaks of here. There is also a thing like the compassion of the godless, but Proverbs 12:10 calls this a wicked and cruel compassion - and this is an inner contradiction, rather cruelty than compassion!

Compassion or mercy without a heart is impossible. The heart is the place where love - or hate - has its origin. For that reason Paul (1 Corinthians 13:3) says: "I may dole out all I possess, ... but if I have no love, I am none the better".

Heartless compassion is no compassion. One's heart should be fully involved in any act of compassion. One cannot really give something (sympathy) if one has not given of oneself. (Just as it would not really help to give something of oneself to God if one has not fully surrendered to God.)

The Pharisees often made their compassion find expression in giving of alms. Compassion, however, cannot simply be practised via a collection for the poor: Not all open purses indicate open hearts!

Formalized compassion is the compassion without heart - in *personal* compassion we have empathy with others. In brief, compassion is none other than grief we suffer on behalf of others. It is only when we suffer with them that we are truly compassionate. We have to help as if we were personally suffering. We can say over and over again that we are compassionate, but it is only when we show it that it is real.

Who does not here immediately think of the Good Samaritan? The priest and the Levite had great love for God's *cause*, his commandments and his temple. They lacked compassionate love for the *creatures* of the Lord, however. They were religious men with enough religious reasons (contamination, etc.) to walk past the groaning victim ... The Samaritan was not a "religious" man, but he had a heart.

From the foregoing it is also very clear that compassion is not simply a feeling, an emotion. It is not enough to *feel* with, but one has to *suffer* with a neighbour. It is feeling going over into action. The good Samaritan *felt* very sorry for the Jew - his arch-enemy - and *did* something.

Compassion also means tolerance and patience. It also involves forgiveness. We read in Matthew 18:21-35 of the man who owed his master a fortune. He was acquitted of the debt and then when he runs into someone owing him a small sum, he forces him to pay up.

We have to be willing to forgive seventy times seven - and then also to forget (Matthew 18:22).

God was so patient with us - and He is still patient. He forgave us *everything*. In Christ He opened his heart to us. "Because God gives his heart to us in Christ, He also demands our hearts" (Overduin).

Whoever lacks compassion proves that he does not know the compassion of Christ, and does not live according to it.

Why are the compassionate blessed?

Because they will be shown mercy - and just they. Those who have no mercy will be judged severely (James 2:13).

The opposite of "Blessed are the merciful" is "cursed are the unmerciful". Whoever lacks mercy or compassion proves that he is not part of the mercy of God. He is not a subject of the immortal kingdom of which Christ has been describing the blessings here.

Here too we have blessings as opposed to disaster ...

The one for whom a great deal has been forgiven also loves a great deal. Perhaps, like the unrepentant debtor we do not quite realize how much has been forgiven us. For that reason, perhaps, our love is so lukewarm, so feeble.

The love commandment is a dual entity: Whoever has experienced God's true love cannot do other than love his neighbour truly. And whoever loves his neighbour truly proves thereby that his love of God is genuine.

Does this mean that my compassion and tolerance towards my neighbour is a condition for God's compassion towards me? It is a question similar to the one which we have already encountered in the previous beatitudes. The answer is also the same. If our poverty, sorrow, hunger and compas-

sion had been the condition on the basis of which Christ had to pronounce our salvation, then the ninefold *makarios!* would never have resounded against the mountainside.

We do not *deserve* the compassion or mercy of God. We only *learn* compassion through his compassion. We only pass on compassion that has been received! One's compassion for one's neighbour is in reality only God's compassion towards oneself.

God's compassion - a lovely privilege for the subjects of his kingdom only - is a gift, a grant. We receive it fully and freely.

With such a great *gift* the *duty* to be compassionate ourselves becomes a sheer delight!

Chapter 35

THE PURE OF HEART - WHO CAN SEE GOD!

(Matthew 5:8)

"How blest are those whose hearts are pure; they shall see God."

For the sixth time the cry of *Makarios!* echoes round the mountainside. It thrills the ear and penetrates deep into the hearts of the surprised crowd. They have never yet heard such a Rabbi!

The crowd is not only surprised because this field preacher is saying such wonderful things - seeing that they only heard reproaches from the scribes. They are also shaken to the depth of their beings because this Teacher does not remain on the surface but penetrates to the essence. He does not preach the outward purification rites of the Pharisees, but goes to the heart of the matter: man's heart itself, which has to be cleansed fully.

A religion of the heart

In the previous beatitude we have already seen that a child of the Lord is somebody with a heart: he is compassionate.

We often think that religion is merely a matter of intellect. As long as we can intellectually agree with the confession of the church, everything is in order. In reaction to this others put all the stress on the emotional: religion is, in the first place, a question of one's feelings. One has to be able to experience it. Some say that Christianity has to do with what you *are*, while others maintain that it is a question of what you *do*.

All these points of view have some measure of truth. What they are stressing, however, are *effects, results*. Christ here puts his finger on the *source*. Proverbs (4:23b) says that the heart is the source of life. "Heart" here means far more than the pump which takes the blood to the body, or than the seat of feeling or emotion.

Christ wants the heart to be right. It does not help to pour chemicals into a stream containing bitter water: one has to go to the source and there determine what is wrong.

It is also not the environment which in the first place causes man to sin (although it can contribute). The Fall of Adam and Eve in Paradise (that is, in perfect circumstances) is clear evidence of the fact that the fault lies with man himself.

The problem is that we know our own hearts so badly. It is unpredictable and situated so deep that it is only accessible to God ... and the devil also knows the entrance. For that reason Proverbs (4:23a) says that it should be cherished more than anything else.

In the Christian religion the concern is with the most essential: our hearts.

Purity of heart

What does Christ mean by the pure of heart?

Pure here means clean - but we should not restrict it to moral purity or cleanliness and maintain that Christ here enjoins us not to have immoral thoughts.

Purity of heart means much more. It involves our words and deeds being in concord with our hearts, meaning that we should not only outwardly (in our deeds) but also inwardly (our attitudes, thoughts and motives) be genuine and pure. There may be no ambiguity or impurity in our lives. Somebody who is pure of heart is somebody who serves God wholeheartedly (Isaiah 38:3). He is in God's service with full devotion and is not hypocritical, pretending to serve God while his heart is far away from God (Isaiah 29:13 and Mark 7:6).

Our hearts are therefore pure if they harbour only God, if Christ alone is King in our lives, if He, with his Word and Spirit, has the only claim upon us. Purity of heart is therefore only another way of stating the first great commandment, to love God and have no other gods.

To have divided loyalties is condemned by Christ. The attitude of God *and* Mammon is a clear example of impurity of heart.

As with most of the other beatitudes this one is also a condemnation of the type of religion which Israel knew so well, viz. that of the Pharisees.

These religious leaders knew all the laws of purity on the tips of their fingers. They washed countless times every day - not because of hygiene but because of religious considerations (cf. Matthew 23:25-28). They could hardly be persuaded to get out of the bath!

From the outside then they were flawless, shining clean. But what does Christ say of their inner beings? Whited sepulchres, plastered white from the outside, filled with corruption of the grave inside. In their hearts they smelled of death, because true love, God-fearing, true spiritual life had no place there.

Their holiness was more pretence than truth. And Christ demands *true* holiness, the sanctification without which no man will see God.

Christ always inverts the order. Or, more accurately, he sets right the order that had been inverted. In Matthew 15:1-20 He says that it is not the things entering the mouth (by unwashed hands) but the things leaving the mouth, the words, that are dangerous. The most dangerous germs emanate from the heart: bad thoughts, words, adultery, whoring, stealing, false witness, libellous language.

The Pharisees, the specialists in purity with their rage of cleanliness, are unmasked mercilessly. They are very far from pure in heart!

Who can then be pure?

Is there any man on earth who is pure (Proverbs 20:9; Job 14:4)?

Purity should not be understood as being sinless. Jesus does not sanctify those who are pure in all their utterances of life, but those who have been purified at the root of their lives through God. Such people never cease struggling against the sin which strives to divide their hearts between God and Satan.

Purity of heart does not mean being convinced utterly of your own purity. A pure heart, seen in the light of the foregoing beatitudes, is a spiritually impoverished heart craving for justice and purity. They are pure of heart

who can, like David, cry out: "Create a pure heart in me, O God, and give me a new and steadfast spirit" (Psalm 51:12); "Turn away thy face from my sins, and blot out all my guilt" (verse 9).

Purity does not mean sinlessness - not even to be wholly free of the Pharisaism and hypocritical ambiguity. "Whoever openly confesses the sins of Pharisaism at the same moment ceases to be a Pharisee. Whoever confesses his impurity before God and man, becomes pure" (Overduin).

Whoever flees to Christ because he has seen the dark depths of his own evil heart and feared it, is pure.

Sanctification, which is the concern here, is not a singular event - it is a process which goes on from day to day.

The way in which one's heart is purified we have seen in terms of David. There is only one Address that one has to go to, because only God Himself, his Holy Spirit, can make us pure, holy. It won't help to withdraw into a convent because your sinful heart goes with you into the little cell.

The promise

More than in any of the previous, the reason for blessedness is a surprise here. The pure of heart will see God! You have heard right: they shall see God Himself.

The promise clearly ties in with the attitude of the believer. Somebody who has a heart with room for God only will have the privilege of seeing this God Whom he serves with all his heart.

A great deal has been written about seeing God. I get the impression (amongst others from the Medieval literature about the topic) that the philosophers were so busy with the problem of how it was possible to see God that they totally forget that it was an issue of seeing *God!*

In any event, the pure of heart, according to Christ's promise, are the people who will see God. Pure hearts see more penetratingly and further: they can see Somebody who cannot be seen by others, viz. God.

Think of how Christ's contemporaries in Nazareth saw Him: They did not see the Redeemer in the Child of Bethlehem, in the Son of the carpenter, the Rabbi, the One between the convicted murderers.

Two simple people, Anna and Simeon, already saw the Messiah in the Child in the Temple. They were pure of heart: Anna, who only had the desire to serve God through fasting and prayer, and Simeon whose heart was directed in only one direction, viz. on the promised advent of the Messiah. They could see right through the simplicity of the Child of the carpenter because they were pure of heart.

The problem with the promise that the pure of heart will see God is that elsewhere in the Bible it is clearly stated that God is invisible (Cf. amongst other Exodus 33:20; John 1:18a; 1 Timothy 6:10.)

Calvin warns us in advance that we should not worry too much about how to understand this, because our first task is to walk the way of purity of heart - the rest we can leave to God. "Some people would like to inspect every room of heaven out of curiosity, while in the meantime not worrying in the least how they are going to get there in the first place!"

Unnecessary curiosity and speculation should be avoided. This makes me think of Augustine's response to the speculative question as to what God had done before creating heaven and earth. His answer was: "God was then making Hell for those who set such unnecessary and useless questions".

Some understand the *see* in the sense of *knowing*. Those who are pure of heart will know and understand God better than the impure.

Others point out again the future time in which this promise is situated, and understand under *see* a meeting with God, appearing in his sight, and living in community with Him.

See is also used in the Bible in the sense of *enjoy* or *possess*. For some exegetes the promise means that God will become our share, our inheritance. God promises Himself to the pure of heart.

In this Beatitude too something is revealed about the glory of the Kingdom. The coming Kingdom will erase the distinction between heaven and earth,

and the new earth, which descend from heaven, will be, like heaven, the place where the face of God will be seen.

This is not purely future sounds, though, because the kingdom has already come in Christ. The pure of heart already see something now, if only darkly through a glass. Has God not already revealed Himself to us? He has done this through his Word: Creational Word, Scriptural Word and Incarnated Word.

Let us look first of all at the *Creational Word*.

In the first place, the believers, the pure of heart, see God's guidance in their lives. And this is not only true of merciful saving and wonderful deliverances - or punishments. Whoever has a pure heart has open eyes for the loving guidance and proximity of God in the often mundane everyday life.

Apart from noticing God's hand over one's personal life it is also the pure of heart who can see the hand of God in the history of the world. Although it is impossible to prick out God's footsteps on the map of world history, the child of the Lord believes that things do not happen randomly, for God's hand is at work in history too.

In the second place the pure of heart has eyes to see the good things which God grants in this life. A pure heart is therefore also a heart filled with gratitude.

In the third place, I think, it is only a pure heart, in which God fills the most important place, which has the ability to see God's greatness, glory and majesty in nature. Not only in majestic mountains, rushing rivers and the impenetrable depths of the universe, where distance is measured in light years, but also in the small things: a simple wild flower, in the wonderful world of the atom ...

God's *Scriptural Word* is the second means through which we can already see him in this world. In this He has revealed Himself in both his incredible love and his grace. All we need to know about God we can find in Scripture. If we truly study Scripture, we shall know God!

The final - and the most important - way in which the believer can already see God is in the face of Jesus Christ, the *Incarnated Word* (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6 with 1 John 3:2,3). Christ is the image of the Lord turned to the people. Whoever has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:8,9).

Seeing God only becomes salvation and blessedness once we have seen God's merciful heart, Jesus Christ. In the Mediator we see God's heart filled with love. The more we see only Christ above all men and circumstances, all misery and need, the more our hearts become pure, genuine, undivided - and the more holy.

And - let us never forget - the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost to live with us always. The pure of heart will be aware of that unmistakably. He will clearly see how the Spirit is working at changing his life, and renewing it. He will experience the consolatory presence of the Spirit of God.

There need not be a problem at all then in terms of how the pure of heart can see God.

As with all the promises in the beatitudes, however, the most glorious is kept to the last. One day, on the new earth, when God lives among his children, we will see "from face to face".

It is not important to speculate on how this will be possible. It is important to know *that* it will be so.

Then we will not only share in the privileges of the kingdom, but see the King Himself. Then we can for ever dwell in his glorious proximity!

Is there something more wonderful than this - to meet the Creator and Upholder of all, the King of kings?

One prepares carefully for a meeting with an earthly potentate. Do we do it as carefully in this instance?

Without sanctification, the epistle to the Hebrews says, no one shall see God. Our task, while waiting for the glorious day, is clear!

Chapter 36

THE PEACE-MAKERS - WHO ARE GOD'S CHILDREN!

(Matthew 5:9)

"How blest are the peacemakers; God shall call them his sons."

The world would not acknowledge that there is great need for the poor, the sorrowing, the hungry and the persecuted - aren't there enough of those already?

A compassionate person could still be accepted, but we cannot solve the problems of the world with the meek and the pure, can we?

There is a tremendous need, however, for peacemakers. Career peacemakers cross the oceans in every direction. The one day they are here, and the following a thousand kilometres away. Day and night they sit in the meeting halls of the world and try to placate, to negotiate and calm down. They never attain peace, though - if they can succeed in postponing war it is already an achievement.

This beatitude has not lost its topicality in two thousand years. What would Christ mean when talking about peacemakers?

Who are the peacemakers?

People are not simply, innately the kind of person intended by Christ when He speaks of a peacemaker. Christ is not here thinking of people who are by nature peaceloving and innocent types who get on well with other people and who do not make a disturbance at night.

We always have to keep in mind the foregoing beatitudes. Christ continues here to describe the citizens of his kingdom (the poor, the sorrowing, the gentle of heart, the hungry, the compassionate and the pure.) The attitude of peace is a flower that can only bloom in the heart of the gentle and the pure.

It is also true that the one beatitude builds on the foundation of the foregoing. I have already directed attention to the fact that in the first four Beatitudes the concern is more with the *personal needs*, while in the final four the concern is more with *interpersonal relations*. Verse 8 dealt with compassion, something which comes from *one side*, while in the case of peace the concern is with peace, reconciliation, a relationship involving *two or more* people.

Why is the world a place of struggle, hatred, war, violence and terror? The fundamental reply to this is: because Satan still holds sway here. He is the Lord of discord, and when he can sow discord, strife, division, he is in his element. All the fruits of the flesh is food for discord: enmity, hatred, envy, murder, quarrel, division, jealousy ... (Galatians 5:20,21).

God is the God of Peace (2 Thessalonians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 14:33; Galatians 5:22) and Christ is the Prince of Peace. For that reason there is a struggle to the death between the kingdom of darkness (the kingdom of war) and the kingdom of Light (the kingdom of peace). And ... we are involved in this struggle daily. We have to choose whether we want to be peacemakers or peacebreakers.

In order to understand properly what is meant by the concept "peacemakers" it is necessary to know what the concept *peace* means in the Bible.

The Bible is filled with the concept *peace*. Think of the lovely words of greeting which God gives the congregation in the Old Testament which is still applicable today: "The Lord look kindly upon you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:26).

The remarkable thing which we discover in Scripture is that *peace* does not in the first place have a negative obverse side, viz. absence of war. The contrasting pair is not *peace - war*, but *peace - evil* (Isaiah 45:7; Jeremiah 29:11). Peace is a positive concept, and indicates blessing, prosperity, life in the truest, fullest sense of the word.

Peace does not only mean inner peace (peace of mind or tranquillity of spirit) but means to be blessed by God in all facets of one's life.

Peace indicates a state of complete being, of being well off, so that there is nothing lacking and one's life can be lived in its fullness. Peace means

the same as strength, happiness, joy. When Christ says (in John 14:27) that He gives his peace to his disciples, then we can describe it as blessing, victory of his kingdom and therefore life in the fullest sense of the word.

It is clear that true peace is only to be found in the Kingdom of Peace, and it is only when man is at peace with God, the King, that *shalom* is possible in his life.

The believers have peace with God in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2:14-16).

This does not mean, however, that the believer will of necessity have peace in the world. (The beatitude following immediately upon this speaks of persecution and vilifying!) There is, however, the peace of God which passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7) and which also rises above all sorrow and persecution which we undergo here.

This inner, deep peace, the peace of heart, is not the full peace itself - it is only one of the *effects* of comprehensive peace which is what the Kingdom of God means.

We can now return to the question: Who are the peacemakers receiving this beatitude of Christ?

In the negative sense, it is not only people who are at peace with God. It is also not people who simply have peace in their hearts. It is, rather, people who have experienced something of the all-encompassing *shalom* of the Kingdom of God. It is messengers of peace who wish to carry the gospel of peace to all corners of the earth. The content of the good news is that in Christ, the King of Peace, life has been restored, has recovered. In Him true, full life is possible again!

Peacemakers have to start with themselves. It would be stupid to live with discord in our own lives and try to bring peace to others! We should in the first place *keep* the peace and not interfere in quarrels and discord which might ruin lives.

But if we are at peace with ourselves, then we should also *promote* peace among others. We should be actively involved in pointing out lack of peace and to eliminate it. This is hard and difficult work, because people do want

peace, but they do not want self-denial! People do not like to be reproached - especially not if they are guilty.

The work of a peacemaker is difficult, because his struggle, as we have pointed out, is with no less an enemy than the Devil. For that reason there can be no peace among the godless (Isaiah 48:22; 57:21). Satan is continually busy inciting them to everything that might spoil peace.

One could mention many practical hints here as to how to promote peace in everyday life. It is important, for example, to note that the peacemaker should learn to listen and to control his tongue. Somebody made the true observation that we have not received *two* ears and *one* mouth for nothing!

The intention of this brief commentary on the beatitudes, however, is not to spell out all the practical consequences and applications. It only wants to provide material for reflection. How each and everyone of us can be a peacemaker in our own environment is a good example of questions which might be fruitfully discussed in a Bible study group.

The promise: children of God

The peacemakers who are receiving the Beatitudes are called blessed, because they will receive a high honour and a title: Children of God. Have you really heard? Children of God!

The subjects of the kingdom of God are *children* of God. There is not simply and impersonal relationship in this kingdom as is mostly the case between a king and his subjects. No, there is an intimately personal Father-child relationship.

The most glorious of all is that God *Himself* will call the peacemakers his children. As during a graduation ceremony or a military parade degrees and ranks are bestowed, so He bestows the highest rank which a human being can receive: Child of God. The Nobel Peace Prize does not come close to this. The highest degree or rank or noble title is as nothing compared to this.

How glorious this new blessing of the kingdom is not!

In this dispensation we already *are* children of God. We *already* carry his image: He is the God of peace, and as his children we are peacemakers. We are already bearers of the message of peace brought to the fields of Bethlehem by the angels: "... On earth his peace for men on whom his favour rests ..." (Luke 2:14).

There is also a future consideration, because the peacemakers *shall* be called the children of God: His public acknowledgement of peacemakers as children of God has not yet taken place (cf. 1 John 3:1).

Self-scrutiny in the light of each of these beatitudes is a *must*. Should this not take place, we have heard beautiful words which we will soon forget. In this case it amounts to our knowing whether we are children of God or not!

The answer to this question we will find if we ask ourselves honestly whether we truly seek peace ...

Chapter 37

THE PERSECUTED - WHO OWN A KINGDOM!

(Matthew 5:10)

"How blest are those who have suffered persecution for the cause of right; the kingdom of heaven are theirs."

Makarios! Makarios! Makarios!

Seven times already the triumphant cry of *Makarios! - Blest!* - has rung out in the bright spring morning. And each time more and other glorious treasures of the kingdom of God have been shown to the assembled multitude.

Seven times - the perfect number - and still it is not the end. This kingdom is not only perfect, but runs over with God's blessings. For the eighth time we hear the cry of *Makarios!*

This eighth beatitude is really the conclusion, the closing blessing. We see this in the fact that the same promise of the first beatitude is repeated here, but also in the way in which Christ addresses the people. Up to now it has been "How blest are *those*". Now, however, (verses 11 and 12) it is more direct. The final two beatitudes are: "How blest *you* are". We could therefore call them a kind of postscript, a conclusion.

We could also say that verses 10-12 together constitute the conclusion. The concern, after all, is with the different *effects or consequences* for the subjects of the kingdom, which have been described in the foregoing verses: persecution, insult, false accusations.

From all three verses it is also clear that the persecution has a communal cause: the fact that the citizens of the kingdom wish to live in obedience to their King.

For the sake of convenience we first discuss verse 10 and then verses 11 and 12.

The persecuted

The difference from the foregoing beatitudes is clear. There the stress had been on the personal needs (the first four) or interpersonal relationships (the next three). In both cases activity had been presupposed. In the eighth beatitudes passivity is foremost: "Be persecuted". One *undergoes* persecution!

Jesus wishes to make it clear to his followers that the subject of his kingdom should not only be willing to *do* something for Him, but - and this is so much more difficult - be willing to *suffer* for his sake.

We have already said that this beatitude brings us to the dark vale at the foot of the mountain.

The King warns his followers that they, if they are truly poor of spirit, gentle of heart, peacemakers, etc., they will suffer persecution in the world. It is precisely because they are subjects of a kingdom which is not of this world, that the world will hate them.

Each beatitude, more penetrating than its predecessor, is a test of the purity of our being Christians. This final beatitude is not simply a beautiful conclusion. It is the most important, the proof of the pudding. Here, as in no other beatitude, the believers are tested!

We can pose the following questions: What do they have to endure? Why? By whom? And finally: why are they, of all people, blessed?

Persecution

The persecution is not explained more fully here. It is also an almost insurmountably difficult task to mention all the ways of persecution.

The devil is most ingenious if he has to think up methods to make things hard for the children of God. Persecution is not simply the spectacular; not only the stakes where blood drips and flames devour, but also the small things by means of which the subjects of the kingdom are hurt. (Cf. the insult and calumny mentioned in verse 11.) J.D. du Toit says rightly that there are not only those martyrs who die, but also those martyrs who live!

In many countries today there is freedom of religion - as in our own too. This does not mean, however, that religious persecution has disappeared. The persecution of the believers in so-called Christian, Western countries has simply assumed a more refined, more "civilized" guise. There are still those wounding words which leave scars.

There are many countries, however, of which we know that the Christian minorities are persecuted with a cruelty which is no less than that of the early church or the religious wars in Europe.

Why are God's children persecuted?

The Beatitudes provide a clear answer to this: Because they do what is right. Because they do what God wants, and not what the world wants, they are considered undesirable figures, *persona non grata*.

The persecution of the believers is therefore basically aimed at God Himself. The hatred against the believers is at the most fundamental level hatred of God. God, however, is unreachable. The whole world can rise against Him, declare war against Him, even declare Him dead, but He remains out of reach. The only ones that can be reached are the heralds of God, his "ground staff", and they are then attacked. When one nation is angry with another and that nation cannot be reached, they attack the embassy!

Christ warned his disciples about this: the world will hate them, because they are his (cf. John 15:18-21 and 2 Timothy 3:12).

A believer cannot be other than be a thorn in the flesh of the world. The first two brothers already proved this antithesis. Cain hated Abel and killed him, not because Abel was bad, but because Cain's deeds were evil (1 John 3:12).

We cannot be Christ's disciples without the world rising up against us and persecuting us to the death. The unbelievers cannot endure being shown their sins by the gospel and the real inciter behind all this is of course Satan.

It is very important to direct the attention to the fact that the persecution that is mentioned here is caused by the fact that believers want to do what is right - not right in their own eyes, but right in accordance with God's law.

Christ therefore does not bless those who suffer persecution (and there are believers among them) because they are offensive, difficult, unwise, fanatic, unsympathetic or whatever. There are many people, Christians too, who are persecuted not because of justice but because of their own injustice. They get their just deserts. They make themselves martyrs!

Christ does not even bless those who are killed because they have unselfishly done something good and acted nobly for the sake of their neighbour.

Verse 11 stresses this: the insult and calumny have to be *for the sake of Christ*, and has to be *unfounded, false accusations*.

Peter writes the same in his letter: "Let all your behaviour be such as even pagans can recognize as good, and then, whereas they malign you as criminals now, they will come to see for themselves that you live good lives ..." (1 Peter 2:12). In verse 20: "What credit is there in fortitude when you have done wrong and are beaten for it? But when you have behaved well and suffer for it, fortitude is a fine thing in the sight of God".

In practice it is not always easy to be certain when one has to suffer insult and calumny as a result of your own lack of tact, impulsiveness or sinfulness, and when you suffer for the sake of the kingdom and its justice. If we do not always remember the distinction, however, we might think that we are martyrs, while all the while we are simply getting our just deserts!

By whom are the children of God persecuted?

By the faithless world - this is clear, but it is not all. What of the religious wars in the centuries during and after the Reformation in Europe? There it was Christians who killed each other!

We need not only be persecuted from the outside. We can also be persecuted from inside, from the church itself, from the side of co-believers. This happened in the time of Christ. The religious leaders of the time

(Pharisees, scribes, priests) persecuted Him until He died at their hands on the cross.

A formalist, hypocritical and dead Christendom is a greater enemy of the believer than the outside world. Hypocrites, Christian in name, are not openly the wolves devouring the faithful, but they are wolves in sheep's clothing, and are therefore far more dangerous. As in the time of Christ, the Christians in name are very taken with their own religion and themselves, and cannot endure having true believers around who regard them as whited sepulchres filled with the bones of the dead.

The more we work towards the glory of God and the truth of the gospel, the more enemies we shall have. We would have to deny God, however, if we wanted to live in peace with everyone. This is what Luke means in chapter 6:26 when he says: "Alas for you when all speak well of you; just so did their fathers treat the false prophets".

But when we know that we are truly suffering for the sake of Christ, we need not worry too much about what the world and the church do to us. If we are rejected here on earth, it is enough for us to know that God knows us. Let it be enough for us if we are blessed by Christ - however much the world piles insult and calumny upon us.

How can the persecuted be blessed?

Christ's penultimate great surprise: persecuted people who are blessed! The reason given: the kingdom belongs to them!

This is the same promise as in the opening verse of the beatitudes. Here, however, the present tense is used, in contrast to verses 4-9. The persecuted *already* have the kingdom of heaven! Verse 3 *announces* the kingdom. Verses 4-9 *outline* the blessings which can be experienced in this kingdom. Verse 10 *sums up* all the blessings in *one* concept: the kingdom of God.

It is as if the beatitudes are reaching a climax here. The greatest test is once again applied with regard to the genuineness of the citizenship of the kingdom. At the same time the reward also reaches a climax: not only a specific blessing of the kingdom of God, but the kingdom itself!

This is sufficient reason to be ecstatically happy under the most terrible and cruel persecution. Is this not the reason why martyrs step onto the scaffold with shining eyes and - if their tongues had not been cut out - with a song of joy approach the sword and the flame? They saw something of the glorious reality of the kingdom of God. Like the first martyr, Stephen, they saw the heavens opening (Acts 7:55,56).

The greatest test

This beatitude is, more than any of the others, the crucible of truth.

If the subjects of the kingdom, with all the features described in the foregoing beatitudes, are also persecuted, then they know truly that they belong to the kingdom of God.

In verse 12 it is stated that the believers have to rejoice in persecution and calumny not *despite* the persecution but (in the Greek) *because* they are persecuted!

We should not worry when we are being persecuted. We should rather worry when we are not being persecuted!

How often have you had to suffer persecution because you did what was right in accordance with the will of God in recent times?

Chapter 38

THOSE WHO SUFFER INSULT - AND REJOICE!

(Matthew 5:11-12)

"How blest you are, when you suffer insults and persecution and every kind of calumny for my sake. Accept it with gladness and exultation, for you have a rich reward in heaven; in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you."

Makarios! for the ninth and final time. Why could it not simply continue?

Christ closes his blessings, however. He makes an application, as it were. He no longer speaks impersonally (how blessed are *they*) but personally (how blessed *you* are ...).

Why are we persecuted?

Christ says that this should not surprise us in the least. It would be nothing new happening to us. The prophets of thousands of years ago were also persecuted like this.

But why are God's children persecuted? They are not, after all, bad people.

Simply because they belong to Christ. And because we belong to Christ, we are different, wholly different, from the world. The world does not want to "belong". The worldly person wants to be his own master. (This, of course, is a *contradictio in terminis*: you cannot be master and servant simultaneously!).

Because we belong to Christ, we allow our lives to be guided and led by Him. The unbelievers also do not like this - they wish to be autonomous, to be their own lawgivers. (Another contradiction in itself!). The same is true of the formalistic, stagnated, hypocritical church. God is not truly being served, but they only serve their own needs and desires.

The subject of the kingdom cannot be other than a stranger, an undesirable element in the world. He sees things differently, has other values, does

different things. His absolute criterion is the Kingdom of God. This he seeks in the first and the last place.

Types of persecution

We have already discussed some types of persecution in the explication of the previous beatitude. The types are legion. Christ Himself mentions only insult and calumny. These are possibly the types of persecution that Christians have to suffer most often. They are also the things that hurt most and which are the most difficult to oppose. Like mockery and making somebody ridiculous, they are satanic methods which come directly from hell and which can break somebody's life down to the ground.

These primitive weapons are still in use today. The sad thing is that they are also very popular in the church itself. Who among us can plead not guilty to its use? Do we really keep quiet when we can't say something positive about somebody?

I have already, in verse 9, directed attention to the fact that Christ here explicitly states that the insult and the calumny have to be *false* and *for his sake*, and not as a result of our own weaknesses and sins.

The reaction

How should subjects of the kingdom respond when they are being insulted and persecuted for the sake of God?

Let us first say how they should not respond.

The believer should never retaliate, or try to nurse a grudge. He should also guard against becoming depressive and without hope.

What does Christ tell us positively to do? "Rejoice!"

According to the tense used in the Greek verb, it is literally "Go on rejoicing". In other words, do not for one moment allow yourselves to be robbed of rejoicing.

The Greek word for *rejoicing* is a word expressing great joy - one should literally run over with joy.

If the carnal Christian finds the going hard, even because of his own sins, he sits down and bewails his lot. Christendom is the religion with the richest surprise: if a believer is persecuted, he rejoices!

How is this possible?

No man, not a Christian either, can rejoice in persecution as such, persecution for the sake of it. This would, to say the least, indicate a psychological abnormality.

The believer who is persecuted for the sake of Christ is out of his mind with joy, because this is the final proof he seeks. (We have already dealt with this in the previous beatitude.) Now he knows for certain that he is not only a Christian in name, but a true child of the Lord, a subject of the kingdom of God.

A Christian does not seek persecution. But when it does come, he does not grieve about it. Then he is full of joy. If he is never insulted, mocked, accused and libelled, he should be worried. Is it the grace of God, or is it a sign that he is such a lukewarm Christian that the world does not even notice him, that it is not even worthwhile kicking at him?

The promise

Christ adds a promise to this beatitudes, as with all the others: You will have a reward, a great reward, in heaven. It has been safely stored there, where no moth or corruption can attack it.

The *great* here does not refer to the quality but to the quantity. The meaning is therefore: whoever suffers much persecution, will have great glory (Romans 8:18). The concern here is therefore not with blessedness but with the greater glory. In eternity there will be differences of degree in glory.

This is another reason why the persecuted - it does not matter how much they suffer - run over with joy. The more suffering, the more glory!

The poor, the sorrowing ... the persecuted know *who* they are (true children of God); know *where* they are going to (a new earth) and know *what* they will find there (a great reward).

The idea of reward does, to be perfectly honest, sound a little strange to our reformed ears. Does this now mean that we *earn* or *deserve* something, that we receive remuneration, payment, because we have been faithful even under persecution?

No, persecution is not something which one *does*, but which one *suffers*. It will therefore be a reward of grace, of mercy! Even though we have suffered a hundred times more than we were ordered, we should not think that we have earned something with it - God does not owe us anything.

The careful reader will have noticed that Christ does not say *what* the reward is going to be. Is it not sufficient to know *that* there will be a reward? Have we not been constantly surprised by Christ's promises in the course of the nine beatitudes? Then we can be sure that God's final surprise will be worthwhile as well.

If you belong to the ranks of those blessed nine times by Christ, then you will also hear the tenth *Makarios!* when you receive the reward that is waiting for you!

JOYFUL SERVICE IN GOD'S KINGDOM

Chapter 39

"SERVITE DOMINO IN LAETITIA"

(Psalm 100:2)

What is life all about? What is the meaning of our daily work? What is the sense of this writer's workshop and of our whole publication project?

Psalm 100:2 gives us a very clear answer in a nutshell: *Servite Domino in laetitia*: "Serve the Lord with gladness".

As verse 1, this verse (2) is also in the form of a call, an invitation. Originally it was addressed to worshippers of Israel entering the temple of God. But it is just as valid here in Harare at the opening ceremony of our Christian Literature Committee for Africa writer's workshop today.

May I briefly draw your attention to the following four points: (1) service, (2) God, (3) gladness and (4) gratitude.

1. Service

Many people today - also in Africa - think that life is enjoyment of yourself, self-enrichment, personal fame, etc. No, says the Word of God in Psalm 100: our lives should not be egocentrically directed towards ourselves, but exocentrically directed outside our own small world. What characterizes a life lived in worthwhile fashion is service.

The New English Bible and the Good News edition use the word *worship*. And this not only applies to the once a week worship service in the church. Our economic, political, social, cultural, artistic and family activities - our *whole* life - should be worship.

Let this also be the case with our project "Christian literature for Africa". The genuine motive of service - and not personal gain or fame - should characterize all our endeavours.

My sincere wish is that the work we will be doing these days will also eventually assist our fellow Africans to live a life of service in many areas.

Actually the Psalm summons not only believers to sing to the Lord and serve the Lord, but it calls (in verse 1) on the whole world to do so! Who knows, some of the books we are planning to write may even challenge and encourage people on other continents to a life of service. Let us, however, not make the mistake of judging our success by the size of our royalties or the number of books printed or how widely they will be distributed and read, but by the quality of our service.

What makes a human being great is when she/he is used by God in his service. Therefore everybody can be great, because everybody can serve someone, somewhere. To be able to serve you don't need all the knowledge, all the education and every writing skill, but simply a heart full of love.

2. God

The psalmist, however, does not call us to any kind of service. He tells us exactly whom we should serve: God created us, we belong to Him (v. 3b), we should therefore be his servants.

There are many false gods in Africa today. Tribalism, ethnocentrism, nepotism, secularism and all kinds of political ideologies are only a few examples. These idols also want to be served, and millions of people are willing to become their servants. But our Psalm warns us (v. 3a): only the Lord is God. Don't waste your time serving false gods, who will finally betray you. Serving the true God means that you stand in the relationship of a child to his/her father. Serving an idol implies suffering as a slave under the cruelty of a tyrant.

What a privilege that the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, wants to use our minds and our pens in his service!

Let us therefore strive, as a new Christian writer's community, to encourage each other to produce only the very best we can. Poor quality Christian publications (as regards the contents as well as the physical appearance) will not be a good testimony of the perfect God we want to serve. Only the highest standards are good enough for Him. We already have enough superficial, anaemic, powerless, pietistic, church-centered so-called Christian books.

3. Gladness

Gladness and joy are the keynotes of this whole psalm, the recurring theme throughout. The spirit in which our service to God is to be rendered is indicated by these qualities.

This is - alas! - so often not the case with many Christians. They regard their God-service as a difficult, boring, and unpleasant duty instead of a joyful privilege. Their lives reveal the attitude of a slave more than of a child.

Let this not be seen amongst us this week. Let our hard work - and hard work it will be! - be a joyful experience because at every moment we are aware of Whom we serve. We are busy with work of eternal value. And when we part from each other at the end of this week to struggle on our own with the laborious task of putting our new ideas on paper, let it be done with gladness.

May the books we will publish within a year or two also bear the stamp of joyful, worshipful service. When the people of Africa read them they should not get sour expressions on their faces. On the contrary, they should shout: "I never knew it could be so wonderful to serve God our Lord in my entire life". Our bleeding continent really needs such a positive message of joyful hope!

4. Gratitude

This joy in God Himself and in his service is rooted in a thankful heart. Thankfulness for what? Verse 5 gives three reasons: (1) the Lord is good, (2) his love is eternal and (3) his faithfulness lasts for ever.

God is good. Goodness is the essence of his nature. It is not merely a temporary friendly whim. If we meditate on his unspeakable goodness, gratitude and joy will overflow our hearts.

His love is eternal. If we have eyes, we will see it very clearly in the lives of everyone of us gathered here.

His faithfulness continues through all generations. How faithful has He already been in this Christian literature project! We started only 15 months

ago with the Indaba in Potchefstroom and already we have our first workshop of writers from all over the continent!

Because God's unshakeable faithfulness, his constant trustworthiness, endures for ever, we can also have faith in the future development of this venture.

It is still a small tree which we planted in faith. It will have to brave the fierce storms, strong winds, severe droughts and terrible heat of the African continent while it grows. But, *Deo favente*, it will one day become a strong and tall Baobab tree, providing food, healing and shelter for perhaps thousands of God's children on this continent.

Everything I have said is beautifully summarized by the apostle Paul in the following words: "So then my brothers, because of God's great mercy to us, I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to Him. This is the true worship that you should offer. Do not conform yourselves to standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God..." (Rom. 12:1,2).

Brothers and sisters, what a beautiful, inspiring and encouraging Psalm 100! Let us make verse 2 the motto of our lives individually, but let it also be the banner under which this literature project sails: *Servite domino in laetitia!*

Chapter 40

FROM INCENSE-OFFERING TO BLOOD SACRIFICE

(Mark 14:3-9)

It is evening. From the little windows of a house in Bethany light shines and cheerful voices resound. Simon the Leper is offering a meal.

It is a meal for the friends of Jesus. A meal of thanksgiving. He had not only cured Simon of leprosy, because Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead, is also there. And Lazarus's sister, Martha, is, as usual, cooking. She is helping to serve the meal.

It is Wednesday evening, just two days before Christ will be crucified. The disciples do not, in spite of Christ's warnings that the end is near, realize that it might be their last meal together.

There is one, however, who has an intuition that the end is near: Mary. For that reason she brings something very special to the occasion: half a litre of pure, expensive, fragrant oil of nard.

This is pure, not imitation. Imported from the foothills of the Himalayas, pressed from the roots of a rare plant.

Expensive: worth more than R300,00 - the wage for which a labourer would work a whole year.

Fragrant: like modern perfume only a few drops are needed at a time, dripping slowly from the marble flask.

But what does Mary do?

She goes to Jesus, breaks off the neck of the flask, and pours all the oil over his head (Matthew and Mark) and as if this is not enough, also over his feet (John). With deep reverence she dries his feet with her long hair.

Why should she do this? Perhaps because she finds it quite impossible to express in words the gratitude which she feels. A special meal is not

enough, because this Man has changed her whole life. And there is her brother, whom she loves, and who has been called back from death.

With the breaking of the flask she virtually breaks her own heart in order to give all to Him.

She forgets herself and the expense of the oil (how terribly long it must have taken her to save the money for the oil) totally. It is only true love which allows one to forget oneself so completely.

She is quiet like a child in the presence of Jesus, thankful that she could express her devotion in this way.

And the pleasant fragrance of the nard oil fills the whole room. Everybody has to smell it, even those who do not wish to.

The life of the believer should be like this. The "fragrance" of his love and devotion to the Lord should permeate the whole environment. Our lives have to be a pleasant incense offering to Him: (The Christian therefore should not only be the light, the salt and the yeast, but also the perfume of the earth.)

If our lives are like this, it does not mean that everybody will automatically applaud us, however. This we see in the case of Mary too. The people (Mark), disciples (Matthew) and especially Judas (John) complain seriously about such an excessively wasteful gesture. It is even said that they rail at her, for they do not share her reverence and do not understand her sense of utter devotion to Christ.

Jesus Himself takes on her protection, however. "Leave her alone", He commands, for she has not done wrong, but right. She had to use the oil to prepare Him for his funeral.

Jesus wishes to remind them of the custom to embalm somebody who had died with precious oils and ointments. Then no cost would be spared - but it would be a late demonstration of love and devotion. (Give somebody flowers while he is still alive rather than after death!) Mary has done this, while Jesus is still alive to appreciate it.

Later there would not be another chance to anoint Him. The women who intend to embalm his body on the third day do arrive, but when they reach the grave it is empty.

One of these days we will commemorate his death by crucifixion again. He did not only spill a few drops of his blood at Golgotha - through his hands and feet every drop of his blood poured forth for us, as Mary spilled all the oil on to Him.

How great is our gratitude, devotion and love? We have so much more to be thankful for than Mary had, because Christ is risen, has ascended to heaven and has sent us his Spirit; He will also come again to offer us a new earth.

He gave Himself fully for us. It is only when we give ourselves to Him that it is enough. Some part of us (time, money, talents) is not enough.

If we do this, our lives, just like that of Mary, will not meaninglessly dwindle into nothingness. Christ's words have come true: "I tell you this: wherever in all the world the Gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will be told as her memorial" (Mark 14:9).

May God grant that Good Friday and the whole of our lives this year will be a continual offering of incense, a sign of our total devotion.

Chapter 41

A VISION OF RENEWAL

(Ezekiel 47: 1-12)

Do grant me the opportunity to open up these verses which I have just read - even though this might only offer a few flashes of understanding.

A miracle stream

It is important to remember that this miracle stream rises in the temple, that is, where in the Old Testament God revealed his greatness.

It is also not just a little water disappearing in the sand, but a stream, a sign of abundance. This stream is not stagnant, but flows, so that the stream is not limited to the holy temple - instead, it flows throughout the world, from Jerusalem through the barren Judean landscape down to the Dead Sea.

It is remarkable that this stream of water also does not, as is the case with other streams in barren areas, become progressively weaker until it dissipates and disappears. No, Ezekiel is astonished when he sees how it grows within 1575 metres from a depth of 10cm. until it is so deep that he cannot cross it any longer - a mighty river.

The stream does not grow itself, it also causes growth. It has wonderful life-giving force. Examples of this are the following:

* When Ezekiel walks upstream, he sees trees lining the stream - trees which had not been there when he was walking downstream. The water is so powerful that trees have in the meantime flourished.

* How many rivers do not end in our seas - and yet the sea does not lose its salt - rather, it becomes more salty. The water of the Dead Sea is so salty that one can float on it! And all the water of the Jordan River that has always flowed into it has not in the course of thousands of years made it drinkable or even any less salty. This wonderstream, however, makes a miracle take place: the water becomes sweet and drinkable.

* This sea is called the Dead Sea because, as a result of the high saline content, it cannot sustain any life. Ezekiel sees, however, how the sea changes from a dead into a living sea when the stream from the temple flows into it. Fishes of all kinds now occur in such abundance that fishermen can make a life from fishing them.

* While before nothing would grow next to the Dead Sea, there are now shadowy trees. These are not simply decorative trees but also fruit trees. They also do not only bear fruit once a year, but there is an abundance of fruit throughout the year for man and beast to enjoy. They are also truly trees of life, because even their leaves have healing powers.

In one word: the erstwhile Dead Sea region becomes a magnificent garden, a paradise of life - such as Eden must have been like.

What this means

These few verses that we have read are just a small part of the powerful vision which Ezekiel had seen (which is described to us from Chapter 40 onwards). We cannot attach meaning to each tiny detail of this great vision - then we apply allegorical exegesis. In the light of the symbolic meaning of water in the rest of the Bible we can understand the essence of Ezekiel's vision. The stream starts with God, indicating the beneficial and renewing force of his grace. This is directly linked to the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. (cf. John 4:10; 7:38 and, as regards the Old Testament, Isaiah 55:1: "... every one that thirsts, come to the waters"). This can also include the work of the believers - God's work.

Ezekiel's vision is not unique in the Bible. We find this theme throughout the Bible. Think of the paradise with the river and the tree of life in the first book of the Bible (Genesis 2:9 and 10; 3:22). Repeatedly this recurs in the Bible to reach a climax in Revelation (the last book of the Bible): a river of life, crystal-clear, translucent, without any impurities. Here there is not only one tree of life, but a whole stand of trees, which bear fruit every month so that nobody need go hungry any longer. To eat from these trees also does not entail death, as when Adam ate from the tree of knowledge in Paradise, because even their leaves have healing power. And this is not applicable to individuals only, but also to nations.

In New Testament terms we could say that this stream of life symbolizes God's kingdom. (The *fact* that he is King, the *region* of his sovereignty and the *blessings* which the citizens of his realm enjoy.) Because his realm already came into being with the advent of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit, we can already today see something of it and experience some of the glory of it. We are still waiting, however, for the new earth which John had seen in his vision on the island of Patmos.

The relevance of this meeting

Nobody could possibly say that education in South Africa is at present on the crest of a wave. On the contrary. It has been politicized left and right. Indoctrination with Scripturally-alien thoughts is taking place on a large scale. *True* Christian education (which would reveal itself in the content of the subjects and the perspective from which they are offered) is a very rare commodity indeed.

And this while our young people have a very strong need of a Biblically reformational vision of life. The well-known *Kairos Document* had a great impact on young Blacks, for the simple reason that it offered them a conceptual framework, a new perspective. Unfortunately the polarization that it preaches is not Biblical. A Biblically inspired vision of life and analysis of society will be needed - for our South African education situation as well.

I do not think that I am exaggerating if I say that the educational situation in our country makes me think of the Dead Sea. It is so salty, so ideologized, that all true vitality has disappeared from it. My fervent wish is therefore that this education course, as well as the conference which preceded it, will pump cleansing and renewing water into it.

We are very grateful to all those from all over the country and outside the country who took trouble to attend. We are also very grateful to our three overseas course leaders, as well as those who will be presenting the case studies, for the fact that they sacrificed valuable time to come to the southern tip of Africa to enrich us with their knowledge and insights.

May in this work something emerge visibly of Ezekiel's powerful vision:

* It may not spring from us, but should emanate from God's revelation.

* We should not lose heart because we are so few. God's work grows in ways that are different from what we might think. He can turn a little into a great deal (cf. Christ's miracles in Matthew 14:13-21 and 15:32-39) - He can turn a small stream into a mighty river.

* The pools next to the Dead Sea remained saline marshes, even though they were so near the stream of life. Let this be a warning to us. We as believers, who have drunk of the life-giving water, are called to bear fruit. Fruits of the Spirit, which will truly nourish our schoolchildren and our students. (Not stones in the place of bread or snakes instead of fish!) Like the leaves of the miracle trees we must through education bring healing to a sick educational situation. Then our sons and daughters will be like strong plants growing vigorously in their youth (Psalm 144:12).

I sincerely hope that during this course you will be able to quench your thirst with the real living water (John 4:13,14). But also that, when you go from here, "streams of living water shall flow from you" (John 7:38), so that you can offer your students and scholars water which will really quench their thirst for knowledge and direction.

Let us pray God that He will bless our labours of the next three days, and will take us up into the powerful, renewing stream of his incomparably glorious kingdom which cannot be halted by anything.

Chapter 42

NEVER THE SAME AGAIN ...

(Matthew 13:44)

"Whoa! Whoa!" he calls to the two oxen in front of the small wooden plough. He utters a curse and thinks out loud: "If only the cursed ploughshare has not broken again. Then it will take hours to cut a new one. This blasted country is littered with rocks". Impatiently he wipes the back of his calloused hand over his sweaty brow and mutters: "This sun is going to kill me today".

He bends down to clear away the soil from the ploughshare and to see whether it would be possible to remove the rock as well. His thoughts are not really with his work, because he is thinking of his wife and children. As a day labourer he finds it more and more difficult to keep them with the small daily wage that he receives from the owner of the land. He will probably never really own anything ...

"But this is not a rock, it is a chest!" In great surprise he pulls it from the soil, and when he opens the rusted lid he peers in wonder at the valuable contents.

When finally he comes to himself he realizes that he is still sitting in the half-ploughed land, but he is not the same man any longer. He has been poor and now he is, in the most literal sense of the word, rich. "A good thing that I did not simply jerk the plough free", he thinks. Such a coincidence ...

"Wealthy!" But then the smile fades from his face. He is an honest man. The treasure belongs to the farmer whose land he is ploughing. He would have to find a way to make it his legally.

Nervously he puts back the chest and replaces the sods over it. He fixes the exact place in his memory and goes on ploughing under the scorching Palestinian sun as if nothing has happened.

As if - because Ephraim ben Hazor is not the old Ephraim any longer. He will not be the same person after this day.

At home that evening he cannot wait to tell his wife Magdalene everything. Late at night they come to the final decision: they will sell all they have to obtain the treasure, which is probably a hundred times, even a thousand times as valuable, legally.

When the neighbours see what Ephraim and Magdalene are doing, they shake their heads in surprised incredulity. "What could the man be thinking, to sell his animals, his plough and his oxen, to buy that rocky piece of land from Ezra? Has he gone quite mad?"

They are right. Ephraim is not the same man any longer. He persists. Finally, after he has sold everything and has nothing left, he is ready to become wealthy - legally.

You know this story. It is a parable which Christ tells in Matthew 13:44. Christ tells it in one verse, but we embellish it somewhat more, so that the picture can emerge much more clearly.

What does the parable tell us? Christ says that this is the way it goes with the kingdom of Heaven (the same as the kingdom of God). More specifically, how it becomes our possession. (The concept "Kingdom of God" indicates the *fact* that God is King, the *area* of his dominion - the whole world - and the *way* in which He exercises it - that is, the rich blessings that are conferred upon us in this domain.)

Just the following five thoughts:

1. As the man was not looking for a treasure but just found it, so we have to do. If we had to look for the kingdom of God, we would never find it for the simple reason that we do not seek God but rather flee from Him. God gives it to us in utter grace through Christ and his Spirit.

2. This does not mean that we first have to withdraw from the world. The man in the parable does not find the treasure in the temple, but in the middle of his daily task. In - and not outside - our daily work and often monotonous duties God offers us his kingdom. In the kitchen, the office,

the nursery - there his kingdom comes. For that reason no profession is excluded.

3. As is the case throughout Scripture, there is a duty attached to the gift. The treasure has been discovered, but does not belong to the man yet. In this way we also have to reach out actively for what is offered before it can belong to us. Divine omnipotence and human responsibility can never be separated from each other.

4. We can make the kingdom our own in only one way. (Perhaps this is the hardest part of the parable for us.) Everything which we own has to become valueless to us and the kingdom of God must assume central position. Stated in modern terms: God's kingdom has to become our first, central priority. Christ Himself says to us: "Seek first the kingdom of God ...", and Paul uses a crude expression to make clear how little value everything has for him in comparison with God's kingdom.

Have you and I made this much progress? Or have we only *seen* the shine of his domain without ever truly *possessing* it? For the man in the parable it was not an easy step. Think of the ridicule of the neighbours - which can happen to you too. There is no other way, however.

5. The final thought is that the person who is willing to dare all will never be the same again. The Bible does not vainly call such people new people - people who cannot recognize themselves.

To be part of the kingdom of God means to be rich - wealthy. Think of all the gifts of his realm: love, gratitude, joy, true peace ... things which no millionaire can buy with all his money.

No person can remain the same with all that wealth.

If you and I remain as we are, we have made ourselves dirt poor voluntarily!

OTHER BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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