

REFORMED CHURCH BELLVILLE: SUNDAY 1 JANUARY 2012: EVENING SERVICE

Sing before: Psalm 119:60+62.

Our help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Beloved, grace and peace be with you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ through the powerful working of God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Song of praise: Psalm 95:1+2.

Prayer:

- **Doxology**
- **Worship**
- **Confession of sins**
- **Forgiveness**
- **Gratitude**
- **Prayer for the need of the congregation for the church, the authorities and the sinful world and appeal to God's promises.**
- **General prayer**
- **Enlightenment from the Holy Spirit for the sake of the ministry of the Word.**

Amen

Psalm 119:29.

Scripture reading: Ecclesiastes 7:8-22.

Scripture text: Ecclesiastes 7:16-18:

Do not be over-righteous, neither be overwise – why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked and do not be a fool – why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all.

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

When we read from the Book Ecclesiastes we sometimes feel that we, as a church of the New Testament, must turn the clock of our faith back. Do we not live in a far richer time and are we not on the way to a far richer future than the first readers? Yet we see from our text that the author definitely had both feet on the ground and dares to ask hard questions and make direct statements with an experience of life that touches everybody. The question we now have is how the text preaches the possibilities of life that the Spirit gives the church today.

The author does not rub out the line between the knowledge of God that we derive from the Bible and the wisdom we find elsewhere. We see in many places how, precisely from out of his religious knowledge, the knowledge of the Covenant of God, the Preacher struggles to see the everyday life in the perspective, the light, of the glorious salvation that the LORD promised His people. True,

when he cuts so deeply into the course of man's life then we hear him sounding so tired, so weary, as a man who has experienced in all facets of life the imperfection of life and hence the complaint that everything is meaningless, is futile, vanity.

But he never forgot that the secret of his life and of the life of the Old Testament's church of the Covenant is embedded in God's victory in Christ Jesus.

In the first verse of his book the Preacher introduced himself as being the son of David and king in Jerusalem. Son of David, therefore also sharing in the covenant with David, the promise that out of him the great King would come who would be a blessing to all people of the whole world. Jesus, the Christ, in whom all imperfection, all mortal weariness will be removed from our world.

He struggles with all the great issues of the day but, in the midst of all the troubles and suffering and despair, he knows that in all the uncertainty there is one fixed principle – "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God". (Eccl 5:1) He knows that God is present in the midst of a church life that is also marked by imperfection. He knows that for people like that reconciliation and grace is to be found in the temple, right through all that now is worrying and oppressive, so that the congregation can go forward in the certain knowledge of God's love and faithfulness.

If we take note of these things, then we have the key to the questions raised by our text. The author is the Preacher, son of David, and he professes that he has a solid base in the house of God in the midst of the storms and uncertainties and false arguments of each day. He knows that the final victory is immovably fixed in Him whom we know as Jesus the Christ, our King and Master, a final victory that brings salvation to a sinful people who seek God there where He is to be found, namely, at the offering that always speaks of Jesus Christ. That is the wavelength on which we can receive the Preacher. For we, too, live with the knowledge of the final victory of Christ and therefore we are able to see beyond many troubles and obstacles because we know that on our way we are surrounded by the faithfulness and love of God in Christ our Lord.

In our text we are confronted by a tremendous problem in life that has remained so for ages. The Preacher has seen that the wicked apparently can sin as they please and all goes exceptionally well with them but the children of God perish in their righteousness. Is it then not better to leave the narrow path of obedience as quickly as possible?

At first blush it appears as if the Preacher recommends this line – "*Do not be over-righteous, neither be overwise – why destroy yourself?*" ...Or, the golden middle route that people like to speak of that supposedly is so much better than the old cramped, tight, steeply up path of the fanatical fundamentalists who regard change as a mortal sin and with their "stone dead dopper" mentality are death to a dynamic modern Christianity! A pity that even the most modern reader of the Bible cannot find any golden middle route mentioned in the Bible because, as in Psalm 1, only two paths are mentioned, there is no third way. Either the right path or the wrong path, for even the bypass becomes a dead end and a choice between the two has to be made. Only Christ is the Way, the Truth and Life. The salvation by God in Jesus Christ is redemption, an untying of the bonds of death and sin. We must more and more live out of the Word and the Spirit that minister in us re-creatively.

But what is the text telling us? First of all we must remember that it is not about the quality of righteousness and wisdom. Everyone who knows Jesus Christ, knows a quality of righteousness and wisdom so high that it can never be found anywhere else. The rule of life of Jesus Christ remains the secret of the true life. What the Preacher deals with is the question of HOW we deal with the Scripturally demanded righteousness in our daily life. What do we do with the God-given

wisdom? It is not about the value of the gifts of righteousness and wisdom we received from God by the salvation, it certainly is about the USE we make of these Divine gifts. The heart of the first part of our text is thus to be found in the words “over-righteous” and “overwise”. It therefore is about your and my attitude to life after we have acknowledged and recognised all these glorious gifts that have entered our lives through the Spirit of the Lord.

But is it necessary to speak of these matters? Well, let us see what the Bible tells us. It is striking that “being righteous” is a clear Biblical concept. To us it sounds strange that the Psalmist has the frankness to call himself righteous before the Lord and to claim fulfilment of God’s promises based on that and immediately thereafter he prays “LORD have mercy on me, a poor sinner”. To us it appears that the two are mutually exclusive. The “righteousness” of the Old Testament included “salvation” and was therefore not a particular virtue that compelled God to be merciful. Precisely because the child of the LORD was reconciled with his God and completely relied on the promises and help from the LORD, that child of God dares to go forward on the path of life with its terrible heights and dizzying depths. Yet serene in the glorious and fixed knowledge that God disposed for him or her a task, a calling for the way through life and has made him or her fit and willing for it. They employ the undeserved loving grace and extol the righteousness of the sinner made righteous in Christ. Yes, sinners who pray for mercy can say together with Psalm 119: “Lord, I work for you, I love your Law, I seek you and your service together with my fellow believers”.

And, regarding wisdom, that is also something that the Bible ties in with service to the Lord. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom. Yes, the gifts we receive also bring stress into our lives. The gifts of righteousness and wisdom are gifts with which we can be of great blessing to others. To maintain justice so that the rule of the Lord can be glorified. Wisdom to be able to see clearly what really matters in the struggle against sin and deadness and weariness. Wisdom with an open Bible. But the question then comes to us whether among God’s children there really is a desire for the maintaining of justice and the speaking in wisdom according to the Holy Scripture? Are empty and barren places in the lives of the congregation and of the church not too often filled and covered up with our own wisdom and our own byways to fix matters? We are so often incited by all sorts of clever sounding words and concepts that must engender life. Recently I read the opinions of a leader in one of the churches around us who said that his church was dead and asleep and that renewal was necessary. But the fault for this situation was not that of the ministers because he knew that they had done everything possible to inspire some life into the church and that had not prevented the church from losing members because modern man no longer desires a formal church. That is old hat. We only lag a few years behind Europe where with all the tricks under the sun and moon and experiments and concerts and circuses and enticements the churches of the people were to be kept going. But the church buildings still emptied and became dance halls and show rooms for motor vehicles and so on – and what church remains today? The church that remained faithful to the Word and did not rely on man-made fancies and did not allow itself to be panicked by prophets of doom to jump around like a cat on a hot tin roof. In our own church community we are also called upon to wake up and to move out of our comfort zones. What is not said is that most ordinary people do not like change – especially not in the church of Christ. Happily that is not a sin according to the Bible. The Bible teaches only that resistance to a change of heart, to repentance, towards our Tri-une God is a sin. Likewise it is to my knowledge not a sin to be in gratitude to God in a comfort zone – if we must use that inflated modern word. In any event, I notice that the revolutionaries inside and outside the church are much more comfortable in their comfort zones than want us to believe. And then, it would appear as if the gifts of righteousness and wisdom are unnecessary. Because the Preacher sees that with all his wisdom the righteous man perishes and the wicked one flourishes. How can you then still dream that God’s gifts are a

blessing for the people? How can we still say that we have a solution and a blissful message for the world?

Do you sense that here we have a tremendous temptation for the believer to give up in total despair and to accept the compromise because you truly do not see any future in serving the Lord as you were used to? Why then stubbornly cling to the righteousness of the covenant and the wisdom of the Bible if that is of little or no help at all?

That places us before the pressing question – how do we continue in this minefield? What must your attitude to life be in the light of the rock-hard facts of each day that can drag you down into a black despair when you know that you have gifts that the Lord gave His people to really give the world the very best?

Is it now time for the “strivers”, such an old word that nevertheless moved such a large part of our people, strivers who must hold on and keep on although there might be such a gnawing feeling of despair simply because it is God’s command – something like “an order is an order”?

We now hear the Preacher saying that we must not be over-righteous nor be overwise ... and those are the words of the son of David, not those of a despairing quitter but a wise child of the Covenant who knows that the victory shall come after the growth of the kingdom of God. The victory is not complete, there is much resistance, truly insurmountable obstacles, a struggle that imposes restrictions in many ways ... but all these great obstacles are part of God’s disposition and of His Son, our King. Accept those limitations because you cannot withstand the sea – in the end you become despairingly perplexed. Hence the advice – do not be over-righteous ... today there are limited possibilities with a limited victory, accept it, so that you are not broken by perplexity. The Lord our God gave us the possibility to step back from great problems. Salvation shall come, but not now.

When we look at it this way our entire attitude changes by not calculating from cause to result. You see a cause and then calculate what the result shall be and what the result of that shall be. The Preacher teaches us to believe childlike, to trust, to walk behind the Father on the path that He designed for us as we profess in the Belgic Confession, art 13. Believe in the victory of the Lord and from there calculate back to the present. Live from and with the astounding surprises of the God of miracles. Even in the most difficult and unpleasant circumstances you may take comfort from the fact that here everything need not come right at once. And to prove that I have not sucked this from my thumb, we can read verse 9: *“Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools. Do not say, “Why were the old days better than these?” For it is not wise to ask questions.”* Wisdom is to recognise the work of God and to let go of anger. It is foolish to harp on the bad things of the present and to forget God’s salvation. Take heart in the God of miracles in good and bad days. All comes to us out of the hand of God. Take into account the limitations of the day and remember that there is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins. Nobody can say that the spreading of the Word was always done wisely. And that is a limitation that comes not from outside but it comes out of my own heart. I, myself, am an obstacle to the Word of the Kingdom ... do not be over-righteous neither be overwise ... so that you do not cause your own downfall.

Does this release of tension mean that the line between right and wrong has been obliterated or that everything is grey? Should we now take it easy so that we can go along with the liberals? Liberals!?!? Oh what an ancient word out of the dictionary of the arch-conservatives of yesterday and the day before that we in modern times have long forgotten. All right, what word shall we the

employ? Heretics, revolutionaries, destroyers of the Bible, demolishers of the church, followers of the anti-Christ? That is what they are and I do not believe it sounds better than liberals.

The Preacher says – “*do not be overwicked and do not be a fool – why die before your time?*” Thus again not a valuation of wickedness but again a practical attitude to life in the midst of all the temptations to take sin not seriously. In all honesty we must confess that in the run of everyday life we have totally forgotten that God is our constant companion on the way. We cannot, with respect, rid ourselves of Him – what may be very irritating. It often is difficult in the run of everyday life to cling to the Bible and to respect it in the struggle against wickedness in practice. How easily do we not become comfortable with the wrong, the sinful because it is part of our daily life. How easy it is to say, based on experience, that we must not be too strict, especially not with ourselves and also not with strangers. And if we then soften the Word from the Bible and weaken that which is clearly given to us about ungodliness being unlawful and irreconcilable with the salvation by Jesus Christ. If we have come that far on the road of co-operation and tolerance then the Preacher turns the robot on our path to red. Stop! Foolishness in the church remains foolishness. However difficult it may be, put an end to the practical wickedness, do not be overwicked, Because the foolishness of deserting the living Word is intolerable in the Kingdom of God. Why die before your time? According to the order of creation a particular development may be expected of every human life. But wickedness destroys life in the bud, together with foolishness it destroys life. God’s work has a fixed line, that God who found joy in His creation and who wishes to see an over-joyed people of the Covenant. That is why the brake must be put on on every path that leads to godlessness and so to destruction of the joy of life and the death before one’s time. We must lead back and return to the salvation that the Lord Jesus Christ brings through His Spirit. To live an absolutely purposeful life.

To close: what can be done practically to hold on to both ideas? Can there be a particular relaxation because you hold onto the idea that the final victory dwarfs the present day obstacles? On the other hand that the threat that the path of wickedness kills all life in the bud? The solution does not lie in what I may devise but in the words ending our text: “*The man who fears God will avoid all*”.

That is the only solution: Fear God, respect Him in word and deed in the place where He has put you with a task, a calling in life that He gives you. The victory shall come and we read in Psalm 125 that the wicked shall not remain on the land allotted to the righteous ...peace be upon Israel.

Respect the Lord when He puts you to work today and tomorrow – sometimes in a place of work that does not please you. Do not ask why the old days were better than today, look at God’s works especially when you see all kinds of obstacles in your path. Then the evil of every day shall be sufficient unto itself and the mercies of your God and Father in Jesus Christ will be brand new every morning.

Respect Him when He shows you your work and task for the day and lets you find it and the direction of your life, of what you do and do not do, set out in the Word of the Scripture.

Respect Him in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, in other words: proceed in the greatest peace of mind and with childlike joyful trust on your path because you know that nothing can separate you from God’s love that was given to you in and through Christ, your Saviour.

Hold on to the advice, given you by the Preacher, by the authority of Jesus Christ, so that you may escape the perplexity, immeasurably weary despair and inescapable perdition. Hold on to that

secret of your life on the path of the covenant that was immovably fixed in the offering of your Lord Jesus Christ. He, the conqueror of death and deadness.

Then you are blessed and you yourself become a blessing. Then you go safely on to the future that God prepares, and which is your everlasting wealth because of Jesus Christ's sacrifice.
Amen

Closing prayer.

Closing song: Hymn 1-1:3+5.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

Amen

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Reformed Church Bellville
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Scripture: New International Version