

REFORMED CHURCH BELLVILLE: SUNDAY 4 OCTOBER 2009: EVENING SERVICE

Sing before: Psalm 99:4+5

Let us commence this meeting with God by declaring openly to one another and to God:

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Beloved grace and peace be to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, through the mighty working of God the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Psalm of praise: Psalm 33:1

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 32:4

Scripture reading: Isaiah 54.

Scripture text: Isaiah 54:2 and Heidelberg Catechism Lord's day 38.

"Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. "

Even when the church is in deep trouble because of her sins, the Lord still bestows grace.

In our days the churches become empty and fewer and fewer people still attend church.

Various reasons are given:

- The church is dry as dust, it is not in step with the times;
- The church does not appeal to the youth therefore they seek something that is more exciting to them.

It was the same in the days of Isaiah.

- The Israelites noticed all sorts of new things in the idolatrous worships around them and started to copy them because that was more exciting than to go up to the temple to pray and listen to long passages from the Scriptures being read out.
- As now, the people then also considered the church to be dry and dead and narrow-minded.

- So they also went to seek satisfaction elsewhere and the church began to run empty.

Let us consider in this sermon two matters that deserve attention:

- 1. The church buries herself in her sins.**
- 2. The Lord remains a God whose grace is without end.**

1. The church buries herself in her sins.

The Lord caused this prophecy to be recorded just before Judah was taken into exile. They were the church of that time.

- They were people like us, who made the same mistakes we do.
- The Lord does not tolerate all sorts of sins in His church and therefore He punished them.
- The Lord instructed the prophet Isaiah to record His (the Lord's) conduct and promises so that we might learn from it - because the Lord deals with the people in exile exactly as He is going to deal with mankind at the end of time.

Consider the striking image with which the Lord speaks to us here.

- He speaks to a woman who has no children.
- The Bible calls her a barren and desolate woman.

This woman lives in a tent.

- The Lord instructs her to enlarge her tent.
- She must lengthen the cords and strengthen them because many children are coming to stay in her tent:

"Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes."

Who is this woman and where is her tent?

- This woman is the church of the Lord and her tent is her temporary abode on earth - the Lord speaks to us!
- We are the church that must go through this temporary life until the Lord demolishes this temporary abode and replaces it with an eternal house of the Father where there shall be many rooms for all his many children.

In our days the church is in crisis.

- A sifting is taking place separating the true and the false believers whose names all appear on the church-register but who do not live with the Lord - precisely as it was with Judah.
- That is what the Lord intends with the image of the woman who is barren and has no children.
- His church has become spiritually barren because the worship of the people has drifted to places and into things which are unacceptable to the Lord.
- The church has become barren, without children.

How does the Lord react to this?

- He causes Isaiah to tell the people what the future holds for them.
- In this vision the Lord shows them how Jerusalem is to be destroyed in war because their worship has fallen into decay.
- Nobody can forget the Lord or be neglectful in his duty to the Lord and hope to get away with it - nobody can escape the Lord's punishment.

The Lord is not a God of hate and of vengeance. He is a God of love.

- Hence the Lord reveals that He is going to change the history of the believers.
- He shall again show them mercy and He shall again bless them.
- Eventually the Lord shall change their destiny for the better.

2. The Lord remains a God whose grace is without end.

In this chapter a point is made that is important for us to remember. **That is that the Lord does not forget us.**

- He will punish us when we do what is wrong, but He will not desert us.
- He is our King. In this chapter the Lord puts the issue very forcefully: **For your Maker is your husband!** (verse 5)

This desolate barren woman has a husband!

- In His compassion He brings her back (verse 7) and
- with everlasting kindness He will have compassion on this woman (verse 8).
- Applied this means that the Lord makes Himself responsible for our salvation - He holds Himself accountable for us.

That is why the Lord uses this intimate image:

- Although you might be a childless woman because of your own infertility, the Lord is your Maker and your Husband!
- The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer.
- The Lord Himself creates fertility in a church that has lost her fertility in the jadedness of her faith.
- He shall do this with a love that never dies - the Lord's wrath is short and His love is everlasting.

When He rebuilds us the Lord will also change us.

- He will use precious stones in rebuilding us.
- Our ordinariness will be replaced by the sparkle of sapphires and rubies and sparkling jewels.

The Lord will not only embellish His church, He will also take over the defense of the city.

- In verses 15 - 17 the Lord reveals that he will render harmless all the attacks and manmade weapons directed at His church.

What is the meaning of this?

- It means that God Himself is the guarantee for the implementation of His own promises.

- Fortunately, the hand of no creature shall determine these matters, for all creatures who have so far wanted to do things themselves have made a mess of it.

That is why God Himself started to enlarge the little tent of this barren woman.

- He died on the cross to do away with the sins of the barren ones.
- He bore the punishment therefor - which means that He made them fertile again.
- He sent God the Holy Spirit back to teach and to guide the believers in such a way that they might recognize their barrenness.

Under the guidance of God the Holy Spirit they must come to knowledge their sins and an understanding of how they act wrongly towards the Lord.

- They must come to repentance.
- They must abandon their infertility and live again in their true service of the Lord.

He sent God the Holy Spirit back to them to teach and guide the believers in such a way that they pitch their tents afresh.

- True believers must simply come to the point where they abandon the world and their arrogance and again become children of God.

There is a great difference between a child and a slave:

- A slave is someone who is bound to his duties.
- He is not free to do as he pleases because there is an authority that compels him in such a way that he is punished should he fail to obey.
- He also does not inherit anything and eventually owns nothing of his master's property.

On the other hand a child is someone who has confidence towards his parents and who eventually becomes owner of his parents' property.

- We are children of God.
- Children for whom space is made: the tent is enlarged and the cords strengthened so that we have space to live.

Which brings us to the application of this passage to ourselves: Where do we fit into the church of the Lord?

- Let us put the question differently: What do you expect of your church? Do you want to serve in the church or do you want the church to serve you?

These are not stupid questions - it is the way in which people speak today.

- The churchgoers say that they seek a church where they can find something for themselves that will satisfy them.
- There are people who seek a show in their church. They call it renewal but what they mean thereby is something that satisfies their personal taste.

The Church is made up of a special group of people - people who make up the body of the Lord Jesus.

- The Bible teaches that the church is the body and that Jesus is the Head.

- How can it then be correct for people to expect that the church must serve them? For the Lord is not there for their sake, they are there for the sake of the Lord!

It is true that in the church something is served, but that is a very special service.

- The love of the Lord Jesus is being served there.
- The church is not there to provide entertainment and it is also not a means of salvation.

The church consists of a group of people whom the Lord Jesus loves and they gather to serve and to worship the Lord - the Triune God.

- We therefore do not come to church (and belong to a church) to be served but to serve and to commune with the Lord.
- In the church we also serve one another with our love and sacrifices.

Presently the church should be in principle what it shall be in the hereafter, that is, people who serve God wholeheartedly.

Consider the words of Revelation 7:15:-

Therefore they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tent over them.

The church offers us the opportunity to serve and to adore the Lord.

- The church gives us the peace of knowing that we are redeemed from the punishment of the Lord and that we are reconciled with Him.
- That is how we became church - the Lord made us His children with the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- By the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ the Lord also bestowed the everlasting life on us.

Let us reflect on the church again - in particular our congregation - is our church dead or are we a living church?

- If the church is dead it is so because we do not know the love and peace of the Lord.
- It would serve no purpose to go to another church because we would kill that church as well - if we do not know the atoning love of the Lord.

A church is not kept alive by the minister or the elders or the deacons.

- A church is kept alive by the office of the believer.
- Put differently - a church lives where God the Holy Spirit ministers in the congregation;
- A church is people who have become the property of God by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ;
- A church is people who now want to be the property of the Lord and who live in this proprietorship.

If it is not so then the problem lies with us and not with the Lord.

- That is what the problem was with Jerusalem.
- They also satisfied their wants in a way that left the Lord's need for our adoration and worship unsatisfied.
- That is why Jerusalem was first destroyed and then rebuilt with those who persevered in their

faith.

Our congregation must see these matters and take our expectations away from ourselves and put them in God alone. We must see before our spiritual eyes how the Lord changes our earthly-tented abode into the eternal dwelling:

Look upon Zion, the city of our festivals; your eyes will see Jerusalem, a peaceful abode, a tent that will not be moved, its stakes will never be pulled up, nor any of its ropes broken.
(Isaiah 33:20)

The apostle Paul also described the eternal handiwork of God in our future in the hereafter:

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked.
(2 Corinthians 5:11-3)

But this does not do away with our duty in this life.

- Here we must enlarge the tent and tighten the ropes.
- The chapter is quite clear that this is what the barren woman had to do.
- With it the Lord says that a church only lives when its members are alive and are participants in the church's worship of the Lord.

Let us read together what is written about the fourth commandment in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's day 38:

38. Lord's Day

Q. 103.

What does God require in the fourth commandment?

A.

First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained; (a) and that I, especially on the sabbath, that is, on the day of rest, diligently frequent the church of God, (b) to hear his word, (c) to use the sacraments, (d) publicly to call upon the Lord, (e) and contribute to the relief of the poor. (f) Secondly, that all the days of my life I cease from my evil works,

and yield myself to the Lord, to work by his Holy Spirit in me: and thus begin in this life the eternal sabbath. (g)

(a)
Tit.1:5 For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:

2 Tim.3:14 But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them;

2 Tim.3:15 And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

1 Tim.5:17 Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.

1 Cor.9:11 If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?

1 Cor.9:13 Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they

which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar?

1 Cor.9:14 Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.

2 Tim.2:2 And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.

(b)

Ps.40:10 I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart; I have declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation: I have not concealed thy loving kindness and thy truth from the great congregation.

Ps.40:11 Withhold not thou thy tender mercies from me, O LORD: let thy loving kindness and thy truth continually preserve me.

Ps.68:27 There is little Benjamin with their ruler, the princes of Judah and their council, the princes of Zebulun, and the princes of Naphtali.

Acts 2:42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Acts 2:46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,

(c)

1 Tim.4:13 Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.

1 Cor.14:19 Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.

1 Cor.14:29 Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge.

1 Cor.14:31 For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.

(d)

1 Cor.11:33 Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another.

(e)

1 Tim.2:1 I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men;

1 Tim.2:2 For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

1 Tim.2:3 For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour;

1 Tim.2:8 I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.

1 Tim.2:9 In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array;

1 Tim.2:10 But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works.

1 Tim.2:11 Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.

1 Cor.14:16 Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest?

(f)

1 Cor.16:2 Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.

(g)

Isa.66:23 And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD.

Amen

Closing prayer.

Closing Psalm: 47:1+4.

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

Amen

Dr MJ Du Plessis

Reformed Church Bellville

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Scripture: New International Version