

REFORMED CHURCH BELLVILLE: SUNDAY 1 MARCH 2009: EVENING SERVICE

Sing before: Psalm 96:1+8

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 73:11+12

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

BAPTISM

Psalm 105:5

Psalm 92:6

Scripture reading: Jeremiah 3

Scripture text: Jeremiah 3:22

“Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding.”

“Yes, we will come to you, for you are the LORD our God.”

Repentance goes hand in hand with selfknowledge. Selfknowledge is in fact also recognition of my own sins and the damage I have done with it.

This evening we do retrospection and reflect on the Holy Communion we celebrated this morning. We shall therefore consider the following two issues:-

- 1. Deeply humble return to the LORD.**
- 2. We return in the power of GOD.**

1. Deeply humble return to the LORD.

When we celebrated Holy Communion this morning we had to reflect on a number of matters:

- Clearly, we came to sit at the table because the Lord commanded us to do so
- At the table the Lord assured us that He forgave us all our sins (backsliding)
 - We came to sit at the table precisely to show that we come to the Lord in complete surrender to worship Him and that we want to repent our sins.

How did we experience this and what are going to do with it? We read in verse 21 that with his keen spiritual ear Jeremiah heard how his preaching reverberated in part of the people.

- He heard them weep.
- Perhaps softly and far away but the sound of their sorrow and remorse was clearly carried to his ear by their weeping.

But that was not all he heard.

- He also heard the Lord calling to the weeping people:
- “Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding.”

Then he hears the remorseful ones call back with hope in their voices:

“Yes, we will come to you, for you are the LORD our God.”

From tears they come to a deeply humble confession that the LORD is their God.

- For a time they had forgotten Him but they come back.
- It is as if they are praying: Please, receive us, Lord.

Partaking of Holy Communion presupposes repentance on our side. Or, as the Lord calls to us in our text:: Return, faithless people!

The word “return” is an interesting word recurring often in the Bible bearing different meanings. All these different meanings show the relationship between us and the LORD.

Of paramount importance is that the way in which the Bible uses this word teaches us that the word describes two moves:

- One is God who returns to us.
- The other is the faithful returning to God.
- These two always go together.

A good example of the two kinds of return being used together in the same verse is Zechariah 1:3 where the LORD instructs Zechariah to say to the people:

Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Return to Me” declares the LORD Almighty, “and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty.

- In this single sentence “return” the first time means that we must repent and cast away our sins

- Where it is used the second time “return” means that the LORD will show us mercy and be with us.

The historical background to and the reason for this mutual returning of the Lord to us and we to Him is the Fall into sin.

- We were banished from Paradise with the words of the Lord ringing in our ears: “cursed is the ground because of you” (Gen 3:17)
- The intimate relationship between us and the LORD was broken.

But in His mercy the Lord is not a God of rejection.

- He calls onto the faithful to repent and to have remorse for their sins.
- His call asks them to change course: they must stop moving away from Him, they must turn around and come back to Him.

How do we come back? We find the answer with Job. He tells us to **reconsider**

- “relent, do not be unjust; reconsider..”(Job 6:29)
- Reconsideration means to change your mind, to come to a fresh insight, to alter your decision.

When repenting one can obviously not stop at insight. Something must result from our insight, something must grow from it.

- The change that grows from our insight is regeneration.
- The Lord will by repentance from our sins recreate our life to what it should be.

In Job 33:25 we read that we shall bodily be recreated to a youthful and fresh body:

- We shall return to what we were in the days of our youth
- Prophetically this means that the Lord shall restore us what we were before the Fall into sin.

2. We return in the power of GOD.

3.

Our repentance is governed by the almight of God and His intervention in our life;

- “Turn, O Lord, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love. (Psalm 6:4)

In this sense “turn” means that the Lord will care for us.

- We who truly believe in the Lord will never be left to our own devices.
- The opposite is also true, for Psalm 90:3 says: “You turn men back to dust, saying, ‘Return to dust, O sons of men’”
- You let men die. All you say is “return to dust”.
- **When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to dust.** (Ps 104:29)

The prophet Isaiah also described this two-fold intervention of the Lord in the lives of people:

- In Isaiah 44:22 he tells how the Lord removes those obstacles that stand between Him and us

- We know that our sins block the road between us and the Lord – but the Lord intervenes in this situation.
- He reveals that He clears the road so that we might reach Him:

“I have swept away your offences like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you.”

The other side of the coin is that the LORD lets people who refuse to listen lose themselves in their sin. Listen to these words:

“Why, O Lord, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance.” (Isaiah 63:17)

In the New Testament the Lord teaches the same in John 12:40 where the Lord says the following:

“He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them.”

From this and other passages it is clear that the Lord does not save all people.

- There are those who harden their hearts and thereafter never return to the light of the Lord’s mercy.
- The Lord confirms His sovereignty in which He accepts or rejects people as He pleases, for He is Lord of all of us and He saves whom He wants to. Listen to what He says:

“Return, faithless people”, declares the LORD, “for I am your husband. I will choose you – one from every town and two from a clan – and bring you to Zion..” (Jeremiah 3:14)

Let these words be a warning to us all: only a small number will be saved! Faith, remorse and repentance are not matters to be taken lightly.

The people whose weeping Jeremiah heard also remorsefully confessed their sins:

“From our youth shameful gods have consumed the fruits of our fathers’ labour – their flocks and their herds, their sons and daughters. Let us lie down in our shame, and let our disgrace cover us. We have sinned against the LORD our God, both we and our fathers; from our youth till this day we have not obeyed the LORD our God.” (Jeremiah 3:24-25)

They were painfully aware of the difference between the LORD and idols.

- The LORD blessed and provided
- The LORD made them prosperous.

In contrast the idols made them poor:

- They had to sacrifice their stock without receiving anything in return.

- They even sacrificed their own children. The offspring remember with pain and bitterness their relatives who were sacrificed to keep the idol Baäl satisfied in his greed.

Suddenly they were able to look back and see how sin consumes everything it touches.

- Their confession embodies the essence that we, when we come to repentance, immediately realize that there are matters to be corrected
- But there are things that can never be repaired:
 - A child killed in sacrifice can not be returned to life
 - The pain and sorrow of the mother, weeping in fear at the sacrifice of her son or daughter to the idol can never be taken away.
- That is why they want to cover themselves when they remember it. It is the same with our sins.

There is an important matter that concerns us too:

- Repentance goes hand in hand with selfknowledge
- Selfknowledge is actually also knowledge of my own sins and how much damage I have caused with it.

How do we get out of this condition? The answer is plain and simple: by repentance.

- We can say it in many different ways and through the centuries it has been said in many different words.

The prophet Joel (2:13) warned that outward show of remorse must be replaced with sincere inward remorse:

- He said that we must rend our heart and not our garments
- Then we must return to the LORD our God: for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. And He relents from sending His calamity.

To Ezekiel the LORD revealed that we will live and not die provided we consider our sins and turn away from them in true repentance. (Ezekiel 18:28)

In the New Testament we are enjoined to fix our eyes on Jesus, the Originator and perfecter of our faith.

- For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, scorning its shame
- He now sits at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2)
- That is the path we must follow.

The truly repentant know and worship God as a personal God.

- To these people the LORD promised already centuries ago that He would take special care of them and that they would be with Him in the Hereafter in the New Jerusalem;
- This is how the Lord predicted it in the Old Testament:

“This is what the LORD says: “I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain” (Zechariah 8:3)

The citizens of this New Jerusalem are we. Let us live and be converted by the LORD to the LORD so that we may be with Him forever.

Amen.

Closing prayer.

Closing Psalm: 118:2+14

The will bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.

Amen

Dr MJ Du Plessis

Reformed Church Bellville

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Scripture: New International Version