

Date: 2nd October 2011

Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7

Background to the reading

The book of Isaiah can be divided into three parts namely chapters 1-39, 40-55,56-66 which depicts the long history of Judah.

Our reading falls in the first part which is also known as “proto Isaiah”. It conveys the history of the threat of the Assyrian empire to Judah, a time approximately from 774 to 697 BC. In this time the northern neighbor of Judah made a pact with Syria against the Assyrian empire when the Assyrian monarch King Tiglath-pileser III was demanding tribute from Syria and Israel. They tried to enlist the support of King Ahaz of Judah, but he refused to join. Then, as the kings of Damascus and Israel invaded Judah, Ahaz appealed directly to the Assyrian emperor for help. The Assyrian king came to his rescue and captured Syria and turned the northern kingdom of Israel into an Assyrian province. Isaiah also witnessed during this time the fall of Samaria in 722 BC and the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC.

It was also a time where the covenant people of God did not follow and obeyed Him. From the leadership of their kings they started practicing idol worship and ignored the warnings of God through his prophets, in this case Isaiah.

Chapter 5 is a beautiful love song about the vineyard of God. In a way it has resemblance with the Book Song of Songs. In this song God planted a vineyard on fertile ground and did everything possible for it to grow and produce grapes but despite all the efforts and tender care, the grapes it produced was “stinking” or “had a bad smell” or it became “rotten” as it says literally in our text.

Grapes are one of the most important products of Palestine. The first mention of it is in the history of Noah. It is afterwards frequently noticed both in the Old and New Testaments and in the ruins of terraced vineyards there are evidences that it was extensively cultivated by the Jews. It was cultivated in Palestine before the Israelites took possession of it. The men sent out by Moses brought with them from the Valley of Eshcol a cluster of grapes so large that “they bore it between two upon a staff”. Grapes were eaten fresh and dried into raisin clusters, and the juice was boiled down into thick syrup. But wine, or ‘new wine,’ was the chief product. The climate and terrain of Syro-Palestine especially favored viticulture, and its wines were renowned from Egypt to Babylon. A vine was a common sight in a Palestinian courtyard, climbing a tree or (in Roman times) a trellis. A peasant ideal of peace and prosperity is expressed in the repeated phrase, everyone ‘under his vine and under his fig tree’. Vineyards were commonly planted on hillsides, which were less suitable for grain cultivation, though they were also established in the major valleys and plains.

Vineyards required long-term intensive care. The soil was first dug and cleared of stones and a wall (or hedge) erected to discourage predators. A watchtower and winepress completed the installation, with a booth for lodging during the harvest. Vines required heavy annual pruning, the removal of weeds, thinning and support of fruit clusters, and sometimes irrigation. Intensive labor heightened expectations of the harvest and made loss of the vintage a bitter disappointment. Deuteronomic law exempted from military service the man who had planted a vineyard but not enjoyed its fruit.

IN verses 3 to 6 God starts a lawsuit against the vineyard. Typically of those days you needed just two witnesses to confirm your innocence or establish your case. Now God calls his two witnesses to conclude the verdict between Him and the vineyard. God did everything in his power to ensure a great harvest/produce but because it did not yield a good produce, He is going to destroy it. The vineyard is both Israel and Judah. Their leaders lead the people astray. The people “looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.”

The love song of the vineyard is actually tragic in its very nature. What started as a love song ended in a judgement against the beloved people because of their lack of commitment, and service to God. His beloved people did not yield the fruit that was expected and will therefore be removed.

This prophecy became true when the Babilonians entered Jerusalem the second time and destroyed everything to the ground and took away the survivors as captives to Babylon.

Sermon

The text for the sermon is verse 4: “What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?”

The depiction of the chosen people of God as a dry vineyard without good fruit seems almost alien to us living in the post modern world. But it was part of the lives of the people who lived in Biblical times in Palestine just like computers, mobile phones and iPad tablets are so familiar to some of us.

As explained in the background the message is quite clear with this very good metaphor. God planted a vineyard which did not yield good grapes and had to be destroyed.

Luckily for us in the New Testament God gave us a second chance. He became through Jesus Christ the vine which provides life to us as the branches. In the New Testament the image of the vineyard gets new meaning. God planted a new vineyard where He made sure that through Jesus Christ, every branch that is part of the vine, will bear good grapes. And yes He even provided a Permanent gardener by way of speaking namely His Holy Spirit to keep the branches nurtured, to prune and cultivate it. But there is bad news for those branches that does not bear fruit.

Jesus said that these branches will be cut off and be thrown in the fire. Jesus expects us to bear the fruit of our faith.

But how can we make sure that we do bear good fruit?

Well we can only bear fruit if we are part of the TRUE vine that is Christ. And the only way to be part is to live in Him, to believe in Him, to hold on to Him, to follow Him, to follow His example of love, to show compassion, to forgive and to trust Him. In short: to have a living relationship with Him where we commit and make time to spend time in His company through His Holy Spirit, through His Words, through communion, through service to others, by sacrificing our time, gifts and money and by coming to worship services.

But we need to be realistic and cautious all the time. When we realize that we become withered and dry by means of speaking,

- when we feel that we are praying into a brick wall,
- when we do not feel at peace with ourselves,
- when we become too preoccupied with the things of the world,
- when we focus too much on ourselves,
- when we become self centred,
- when we struggle to forget and forgive,
- when we do not love our neighbour,
- when we hate more than we love,
- when we moan more than we laugh,
- when we grieve without hope
- when we do not want to attend worship any more,
- when we do not want to read Bible or say a blessing before we eat.

We need to do something about it!

When these warning signs appear we need to act in faith. We need to come to terms with what is happening with and to us. We need to address it. If we cannot address it ourselves, well there is two ministers in this congregation who can help you to become a living branch again, bearing fruit.

The sad thing is that I never ever hear of people that actually tell me of their struggling to have faith. All I hear is people speaking about the church, what is and what is not working in the church or the politics in the wider church. I am often amazed that it feels to me that I am the only one who struggles to hold on, to forgive, to laugh when life is really hard and demanding and to cry with hope. I am often surprised to hear how people can “brag” about their commitment and hard work in the church, while they never talk about their faith, the belonging to the TRUE vine that is Christ.

To have faith in the Lord Jesus means to have a lifestyle of honesty, trust, love and hope. To walk with Christ means hardship, challenges, sacrifice but also real joy and peace. To be part of the TRUE vine means to love unconditionally, to forgive no matter what – even if it takes a lifetime...to admit that nothing is possible without the help of God.

God does not expect you and me to be a “superman”. He expects you and me to live with Him in a relationship where we show our commitment to HIM through actions of love, faith and hope!

Amen