

Sermon: 24 May 2009

The text for the sermon is verse 6:

⁶ For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. ¹

In our very sensitive environment that we live in today the words of Psalm 1 may be experienced as quite offensive. I mean can you just imagine yourself calling your boss “wicked” even “unrighteousness” because of his lack of faith! I mean in our society we are so afraid to label people and be sensitive to their ways.

In the time of this Psalm it was quite a different story. The context of this Psalm was the Jewish way of life. All the people that listened to this Psalm were part of the Jewish community within the borders of Israel. The Jews had very strict religious laws like:

- Obeying the 10 commandments;
- If you were the men, attending the temple regularly
- Practising the prescribed sacrifices at the temple.

All of them did what Deuteronomy 6 ordered them to do namely to apply the rule of obeying God with everything they did. It is called also the *Shema* prayer: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” They wrote them on the doorframes of their houses and on the gates/entrances of every town. They obeyed all the religious laws as best as they could. The Psalmist says everyone that obeys God’s commandments is righteous.

It is thus no surprise that everyone who did not obey these laws, stood out. They were the foreigners, the outsiders. Most of the times they were considered as unclean and no-one would speak to them. If you would touch them you would become unclean and miss every opportunity to go to the temple. In short the words of Psalm 1 bear witness to everyone who was not a Jew, who did not obey God’s law and who did not share the same religious sentiments. They were the sinners, the wicked, or the unrighteous.

And if you were a male you could never become a Jew! Conversion to Judaism was only possible for gentile women who married a Jew. This was allowed since the time of Ruth. But she had to prove her Jewish faith by obeying the commandments of conversion. These women had to go through a process where they would be refused at the temple three times. After they stood fast in their new belief, they could be Jews and fit into the society of the rest of the Jews.

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ps 1:6

It is no wonder that the Psalmist says that if you were the outsider you could not expect any favours or grace. If you were involved in a lawsuit, all the rest that resembled witness would be the righteous. You would be totally outnumbered. You would have no chance to defend yourself. And there would be only two witnesses to get you convicted! You had no place, in both the temple and in the meeting places of the rest of the society, the righteous!

The borders between the righteous and the wicked were very clear and vivid. You could see the differences between the two with your own two eyes. It was a fact that the unrighteous could not survive in this context and therefore the words of the Psalm: the ways of the wicked shall perish!

In our society the borders between believers and the nonbelievers are more fluent without seeing the differences so vivid and directly.

Although Christ declared everyone that believes in Him as righteous, we as the believers do not always live our faith so openly. We are almost afraid of those who do not believe or who are not coming to church. We are so afraid not to step on their toes. Not to offend them. Not to tell them of God's commandments of love and missionary outreach! It is shocking that we as parents promised God at the baptisms that we would raise his children to his glory and then we so easily shift the responsibility to them. We let them decide if they want to come to church, to read the Bible or to pray!

I think a good depiction of Christians followers of Jesus nowadays are that we sometimes act as "secret agents" of his mission in the most secretive and sensitive way. It is as if we only live our faith on Sundays, only proclaim our faith in the safe environments of our houses, and speak about it only in the company of those who makes us feel comfortable to speak about it!

I do not think it is an understatement to say that the nonbelievers have managed to push the believers onto the boundaries of our society. Why?

We allow them to do it to us. It happens very sudden and quickly when we swear just as much, drink just as much, and loose our tempers just as much as the unbelievers around us do! We fall so easily into the habits of those who do not come to church and love the Lord. And then before we know it, we are falling further and further into the traps of this world with its demands and needs. And then it is as if everything starts to fall apart, while we drift away from God. It is then that the words of Psalm 1 make totally sense – we experience how we are blown away by the slightest storm.

No we need to start listening to God who acts through his Holy Spirit because the only thing apart from our faith that distinguishes us from the nonbelievers is our consciousness made possible by God's Holy Spirit. God's Holy Spirit reminds us of whom we really are – people that are declared as righteous through the redemption of Christ. God's Spirit tells us when we sin against God and others. It usually happens

when we feel guilty and cannot pray. But God's Spirit also guides us through the difficult times when we lose hope and cannot cope with the demands of the nonbelievers. The only thing that God wants us to do is to live in a loving relationship with him. He wants us to trust him with and in everything we do. We need to pray constantly for his Holy Spirit to help us through the storms of despair and hopelessness.

The time has come for us all to stand up for our faith whilst allowing God to equip us through his Holy Spirit. If we allow God to direct our lives through His word and Spirit we will stand out and invite the nonbelievers to live in a relationship with God. If we make God our first priority, we will be like a tree bearing fruit, with green leaves that do not wither! If we hold on to our faith, we will be able to see the eternal Kingdom of God.

May we all go out of this Church this morning with faith, hope and love whilst listening to God's Holy Spirit working in us. May we find the courage to tell everyone wherever we are that we believe and that God declared us in Christ righteous not because of how faithful or good we are – but because of His grace, love and mercy! May we hold on to the promising words of Psalm 1: "For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

Amen

² *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ps 1:6

Readings for the week

Psalm 1 (from www.rootsontheweb.com)

By placing this psalm at the beginning of the Psalter, the editor made his purpose clear. To pray these prayers is to choose the way of the just, rooted in God, and to reject the way of the wicked. The psalm follows a chiastic pattern — ABBA — with the descriptions of good and sinful lives sandwiched between vivid similes. It is linked with the Wisdom literature by the idea of delight in God's law, and also by the rejection of 'scoffers'; this word is common in Proverbs, which shares with other Wisdom books a deep concern for truthfulness and charity in speech. The simile of a tree thrusting its roots deep in the search for water, contrasted with chaff scattered by every passing breeze, emphasises the stability and security of those nourished by fidelity to the word of God.

Other readings: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26, 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19