

**Date: 28<sup>th</sup> August 2011**

**Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald**

**Reading: Romans 12:9-21**

The text verse for the sermon: <sup>10</sup> *Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves.*

When I read our bible reading I thought a long time about it and wondered how do we as Christians shape our society? Then it dawned on me. We do not shape it anymore. No our society shapes us as Christians – society tells us what and how we ought to live our lives, how to raise our children and how to be ethically responsible. But this phenomenon is not new. In fact in Paul's day the church faced some of the same dilemmas we are facing today. Their society did not want to hear anything about Christ or His values. As a matter of fact I think the words in our reading would have been to many living in Gentile Rome a joke because their society dictated an almost opposite set of rules and values.

In their society it was all about honour and shame. You needed to defend your honour at all cost. You never gave it away. To give away honour was regarded as shameful! But now Paul writes to the early Christians in Rome to tell them, that because God loved them through Christ Jesus they must live this love with an example of service and sacrifice to others. They must "honour" God's command to love Him and their neighbours as they love themselves!

If they love God, they will live lives in accordance to his will. They must be generous to all people. Hospitality meant a whole lot more then than now. It meant that you would take care of your guest's safety, their well-being and all their needs. In antiquity "hospitality" meant putting up travellers (without charge) in one's home while they were in town; they would normally carry letters from those trusted by their hosts, attesting that they were to be accepted as guests.

They must never curse those who prosecute them unjustly. They must think of the judgement of God. He knows and sees everything. They must allow God to deal with the injustice. This commandment of Paul was in direct opposition to the Gentile world whereby the wrongdoers would be cursed!

They must be sensitive to other people. In those days weeping was seen as a proper expression of sympathy like rejoicing was a proper way of expressing happiness.

They must live in harmony with all people. Humility was a Jewish virtue not a Greek one except for those who ought to be humble namely those who had no social status and lived on the margins of society. In Jewish society your honour depended on the friends you associated yourself with. No Jew with honour would find him in the company of those who had less honour than himself. Now Paul urges them as Christians to associate themselves with those living on the margins, and the shameful. They must never be arrogant and think of themselves as better than others.

They must be inclusive, taking in consideration all the views of the people. They needed to live the peace that comes from God. Revenge will not lead them anywhere. God will on the day of judgement decide to punish. In verse 20 Paul quotes Proverbs 25:21–22; although Solomon might have meant “heap burning coals upon his head” as the enemy’s emotional misery, in Paul’s context of vengeance this expression may mean that one’s enemy will be punished all the more severely in the day of judgment.

They must live as people who have seen the Light of God that started in Bethlehem. To love God, means to love their fellow people and go against what their society is dictating to them!

In a sense our reading is like an “instruction manual” on how to behave as an everyday Christian. And I do not know if you have read a “manual” before. I am not going to ask the men, because we men usually do not read it at all! A manual is quite time consuming and sometimes very difficult to understand. I said at a wedding preparation meeting this week if you want to have a serious disagreement with your wife, go and buy something that you must assemble yourself! Typically, we men will rip the package open and start assembling the bits and pieces, while the woman will grab the manual. And then the disagreement will start. In the end the woman would either say: “Please continue” and see later how the newly assembled piece of furniture falls apart, or she will say: “let me do it,” while he looks on with amazement!

I think this is exactly true of how we live out our Christianity too. We can either read the “manual” that is the Bible and live our lives according to it or not read the manual and experience how our Christianity disappears out of the window! And in many cases on the manuals there are no helpline numbers to call for help or assistance. In our case we have the support of God’s Holy Spirit. We can just pray and trust that He will help when the pieces of our lives starts falling apart.

Maybe that is our biggest problem. We do not read our Bibles enough. If we do, we will be obliged to listen to God’s biggest commandment of love. Then we will not struggle to LOVE, to be hospitable, to be forgiving, to be humble, to be inclusive, not to be judgmental, and not to seek revenge! If we listen to the world or our society, then we will lack love for God and other people.

We even have God’s Holy Spirit to help us when life does not make sense, when we are struggling to understand what God is saying to us in His Word, when our lives are falling apart, when nothing makes sense. We have the luxury of speaking to God when and wherever we are.

Can you imagine what impact we will have on our villages when we start living what the Bible tells us to do all the time? Can you imagine the difference prayer can bring in the lives of people?

Amen