

Sermon for the combined Reformation service in Chatsworth on the 3 November

Is 62: 6-7 and 10-12

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen

Lord heavenly father we thank you for your word, strengthen us through the same, that we might be witnesses of your love to the people around us. Amen

Dear friends of our Lord Jesus Christ, stating the obvious on Reformation day – we all realize the need for continuous reform. Especially if it is understood as a continuous need for repentance and forgiveness.

There is a remarkable similarity between the situation of the Old Testament Prophets and the of the people of Israel to the time of the Reformation – the reformers, Luther and his colleagues and the people in Europe. God sent prophets, watchmen who called the people back to the word. When we talk about the need to reform and change, there are possibly various things we think about, on the one hand we might be nostalgic about the past and think, if only we were like the so called early church or like the reformation, or possibly like the previous pastor, or we just reckon all things that have been passed down in tradition need to change and are just mere rituals, because we think everything must change.

Celebration of Reformation is not just a celebration of what happened

nearly 500 years ago, but rather a continual reminder and reflection about our own need to repent and refocus on the promises of God.

I mean if you take the reformation time 500 years ago – the crass abuse of the church and its political structures literally screamed for reformation. Maybe its more difficult to be so convinced and clear about what is in need of reform in our time.

But let us before we come to today first look at the situation at the time of Isaiah. Obviously Israel could claim to be the called and elect people of God. They had the temple, the holy city of Jerusalem, they had a lot of things going their way. We however know that the prophets warned the leaders and people of Israel, that all of this would not be of any use, if they would loose the focus and take things for granted, that were not to be taken for granted. If they would ignore the covenant with God and thereby ignore his will and command. If they would follow other Gods and trust other nations to give them protection and prosperity. If they would forget the commandments and the necessity to stand up for righteousness and social justice, then all of their other rituals and services would be hollow and not pleasing to God.

I guess the people were taken by surprise when their enemies came and ransacked Jerusalem, when they were led away into captivity. Suddenly the people were confronted with the reality, that they were far removed from Jerusaelm, the temple was destroyed and it was hard for them to understand, that it was God himself who had allowed the enemies to punish his people like that.

It was a steep learning curve for them, as they had to learn and trust God that this captivity, this negative situation in their life did not mean the end of their relationship to God. Isaiah is obviously well known to us, because he was allowed to promise and prophecy the coming of the servant of God – the coming of the Messiah, of Jesus himself. But he was also allowed to witness the return from Babylon. A challenge I guess for the readers and listeners of Isaiah was, that they were not always sure, which part of his prophecy has been fulfilled now, which is still waiting to be ultimately fulfilled. Take for example the return to Jerusalem and the hope, that Jerusalem and the temple would be restored. It was difficult to not associate the return to Jerusalem to the ultimate salvation and glory that would be revealed at the end of time. For a time some people would have thought the salvation and glory was to be revealed in the Temple built after the exile, but happened when it was destroyed again in New Testament times. The people were faced with the renewed challenge of understanding and interpreting the promises of God and how their relationship to God was to be defined and understood. Isaiah read in connection with the Revelations and with the understanding of Hebrews, we realize, that Jesus Christ replaced the temple as he became the focal point of our worship, and the new Jerusalem is the picture of the ultimate revelation of Gods glory at the end of times when this world will pass.

After the initial euphoria about the return to Jerusalem had worn off, after the hardships of starting to rebuild the city and the temple became overwhelming the prophets words speak into a very different situation. His listeners are not complacent, they are much rather in danger of falling into despair, because their situation does not give them lots of confidence.

The word of the sentinels or watchmen on the walls reminds us of the fact, that God is not always as present and near as we might imagine – God can remove and withdraw himself and he can remain silent. We cannot control God or his salvation. That is the challenge in our proclamation and a reason for our temptation, if we are troubled by his distance and the terrible state of the World we live in. What is worse – the time when God speaks clearly through his prophets and warns his complacent people, that they better wake up, or else he will cause things to happen, that will cause them to take heed. Or is it worse – when God withdraws and seems so distant, that there seems very little to no reaction on his part to the things that are happening in the world?

Interestingly the sentinels on the walls are to call out to God and remind him about his own promises. Is there a chance that God has possibly forgotten his promises, is the situation really that bad, that God has kind of given up on his promise, just as many people have for a long time already given up believing in them. This reminds me of Luthers explanation of the our father. Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, They will be done. Gods name is holy even without our prayer, his kingdom will come without our prayer, and his will will happen without our prayer, but we pray in this prayer that the Lord has thought us, that his name would be holy amongst us, that his kingdom would come to us and that his will would happen in our lives too. Reminding God about his promises is not so much too prevent God from forgetting his promises, but rather praying that his promises would happen in our lives too. How does that happen, well again with the words of the catechism “Gods will is done when he breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow Gods name or let his kingdom come; and when he strengthens and keeps

us firm in his Word and faith until we die. This is his good and gracious will.

If the sentinels are to stand on the wall and remind God about his promises it seems pretty obvious, that we are to remember these promises ourselves. Do we remember, what God has promised and can we point out these promises to him. We are to remind ourselves about the promises of God. It is not about shouting out what we want or to express our wish list but rather to remind God and those who are concerned about the promises God has made.

We could as part of the new testament impossibly try and understand and fathom Gods promises without the full revelation of Jesus Christ, because through him all Gods promises have been revealed and made certain. I want to jump now from the situation in Isaiah to the time of the Reformation. The church at the time was promising the people of Europe the chance to get into heaven or out of perguatory through its suffisticated system of indulgences. That whole system was based on the principle of payments for sin. If I did something wrong, obviously I could get forgiveness, but part of the forgiveness was that there was a penalty to be paid for the sin. The church itself had a treasure of good works that the saints had accumulated and the church as the guardian of this treasure was willing to sell off these good works in the form of indulgences. So people could pay and get a receipt from the church to show that they could get out of purgatory.

We all know, that this is ridiculous, but we might be amazed, that the Roman Chatholic church still sells indulgences to this day.

The Reformers were fighting this abuse of power and the misleading of people away from the promises of God. And they again clearly focused and clarified, that Gods promises were focused on his son Jesus Christ, who had paid for all sins and therefore has reconciled us to his father. The relationship to God and to his son, is not made through any payments or good works on our side, but rather through faith in him. Our faith in Christ comes from the word – and therefore as a third pillar of the Reformation there was a renewed focus on the word of God as being accessible for all people, because God himself speaks through his word. And our whole relationship to God is defined not by who we are, or what we can do, but rather through Gods grace, so by who he is and by what he has done.

The reformers came up with a very simple formula to remind each other about what is important: They said Solus Christus, Sola fide, Sola gratia, Sola scriptura - that is latin for only Christ, only through faith, only through grace and only scripture. These pointers became vital in the understanding of Gods promises and helped clarify their teaching and understanding about God and us.

It is against these pointers that one can quite easily measure the need to reform – that is to return and refocus on the essentials of Gods promises.

Going back to our sermon text in Isaiah from Verse 10 – we realize that the prophet Isaiah does not only expect us to remind God – and as I have tried to show ourselves – about his promises, but also to essentially be involved in the Mission of God. The mission of preparing the way for all people to come into the new city of Jerusalem.

We are invited first to go through the gate, prepare the way for the people, build a highway, clear the stones. Take away the stones and obstacles that have been placed between people and between us and God.

What might those obstacles be, as we might think about the need to reform and change to become more accessible. Again I want to quote from the explanation to the our Father the sixth petition “And lead us not into temptation” God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attached by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory.

It is not only the challenges from the devil and the world outside, but rather our own flesh – our own sinful nature, that continually places obstacles in our lives to lead astray and away from God. It belongs to our life as Christians to actually train and exercise ourselves in faith to overcome these obstacles.

Interestingly enough there are obstacles that are placed not by the evil foe, but rather by God himself, so that we would learn and grow in faith. You see God himself has placed a stumbling block Romans 9,32 quoting Is See I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame. There are central parts of our message that are not really palatable to the normal or natural man. We however may not be tempted to remove these stones that are the critical points of faith, that anger and irritate the people in the gospel of God. That is the message of the cross, that is the message of Holy Communion (eating and drinking Christs body and

blood), that is the message of Christ being the only name in which man is to be saved.

The challenge for us as congregations, and today we are members of various congregations, is to differentiate between the things that are necessary because they have been placed by God, and those things that we as humans have caused and need to be reformed – that is changed and removed.

We are not only to remove obstacles, but rather also to put up signals or ensigns – victory signs for the people to see, to rally around, to get confidence. What are the signals and signs that we can set up.

In the context of reformation the signs of the church were defined by the Reformers as the word of God preached purely and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ. Obviously when the reformers went against the Roman Catholic church they initially wanted to remain within that church and only wanted to reform it. But when the resistance of the Church became so strong, it became more and more clear, that they were going to be kicked out of the church, rather than the church reforming itself. The people around the reformers needed the confidence to say, are we on the right track, are we sure, that what we are relying on is a strong foundation. And that is why the reformers basically had to define what it meant to be a true church and they came up with those two signs: Word and sacrament. The thinking behind that is, that in Word and Sacrament if preached purely and if administered according to the institution of Christ, then Christ himself is present as ruler and king of that church. Then the people in that church are confronted not by some priest or preacher, but rather are faced by their Lord and savior himself.

That is the exactly the same point that was used, when in the 50 and 60 of the previous century the Mission was really busy discussing the implications of independence of the church. The mission had worked in SA for many years, and obviously it was a world wide movement after the two World wars, that the churches that had emerged from the various mission organisations all over, that they would become independent. The Mission Director of the Bleckmar mission was tireless in reminding the people it was not actually about the independence from the german mother church or mission organization. In fact the real challenge of independence of the church, is actually its independence from outside influence, from influence from the world (In the words of the chatechism, the devil, the world and our own flesh). But in contrast to that independence, there remains a dependence in the church, that would be fatal for the church, if it would give it up. We are and we remain dependent on Christ. He is the Lord of the church, his word his presence his will determines the independence of the church.

Just as we daily return to Christ through repentance and requesting forgiveness for our sins, we daily request in the our father, that his name would be hallowed amongst us, that his kingdom would come to us, and that his will would be done amongst us just as it is in heaven. That is the evangelical request for daily reformation, the request for daily focus and clarity on Christ.

May God our father grant us this clarity and focus daily through his son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord our God, we pray: keep us in your mercy and protect us from all temptation, that through your Holy Spirits help we might live according to your will and in all our times of need and suffering we are comforted by your goodness. Through Jesus Christ our Lord who reigns and lives with you and the Holy Spirit now and forever Amen.

And the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding may preserve your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus Amen.