

Sermon: You will reign in life...

Romans 5:12-19

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Today is the first weekend of Lent, the period in the year of church in which we are called to some serious introspection. We focus on the final period in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and we wonder, how has my life contributed to his death. The Bible readings in this month point in this same direction of course.

A month of introspection may sound nice to some people who have a contemplative mind and heart - but not all people are of that fabric. I personally get energised by being by myself, alone, but I get bored after 5 minutes of looking into my soul.

Many people are also scared of some introspection. We know how much rotten fish we hide, and we do not like the smell of it.

1 Adam and Christ

I am glad that when the Bible speaks of our salvation, it does this in a manner that is not focussed on special, mystically oriented or introspective personalities only. Salvation is presented to us as Gods gift for all humankind, of whatever personality types we are.

This is shown clearly in comparison of St Paul between Jesus and Adam. Being lost as a human beings is presented to us - not in the first place as the result of personal wrong I have done. It is presented to us as the result of belonging to the humankind that sprung from Adam. We are part of the family of Adam, and that is quite enough for being lost.

And the solution? God makes us part of a new family, the family that Jesus introduced - the family of those who voluntarily embrace Jesus Christ by faith. The focus of this divine solution is on God himself, the giver of grace and on us being part of that large new family of God.

We share our period of Lent - of fasting - with Adam and Jesus. Adam was told by God to not eat from one tree - and Jesus was in the desert for 40 days with no food.

Adam was in perfect circumstances. He had all he wanted. He could eat anything he liked. There was nothing that was not available to him - he lived in a land of plenty. Just this one thing he should fast from... and even that small demand of God was too much. As we all find it so hard to live by the will of God.

Jesus was not in the land of plenty; he was in miserable circumstances, 40 days in a dry desert is awful. But he was able to resist the temptations and to truly serve and trust and love God.

The same story of the temptations of Jesus in the desert seems to also be set against the backdrop of the exodus of Israel through the Egyptian desert. After God saved them from slavery and during their journey he supplied in all their needs, they rebelled.

Mankind does not serve and love God; the people of Israel were not able to obey him. But here, finally, God has found someone who truly obeyed him and who was the personal expression of the whole will of God. God could not find such person among mere humans. We could not supply God with one truly serving and loving perfect man or woman. The only one we can point to in our defence, is Jesus Christ, and He actually came from God himself.

What Adam and all of humankind failed to do, was now finally done by Jesus Christ - God was satisfied. And with Jesus Christ God began to build a new humanity - a people attached to Jesus Christ by faith.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new is come. All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ. (2 Cor 5:17-18)

God has made a new start. And the focus is not on our introspection, not on what we do, on how piously we pray, it is not focussed on how religious we are. The focus is on Jesus Christ, God's perfect servant, who with his perfect life satisfied Gods demands for us. What we, Adamites, could, not do, Jesus Christ has done for us. And he made us into new people.

2 Confess our transgressions

What does it mean, that we are a new creation? Think in the first place not in an individualistic manner about this. In the Bible, the community is the norm; the individual is the abstraction.

That we are a new creation means that we are part of Gods new creation. We are part of the new world that will most certainly come. We look forward to participate in Gods new world.

And we already, today, participate in this new world because it is the world of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Spirit. We are already part of this world, with the angels; with the saint, and with all those who have passed away in Christ before us.

We look forward to this Kingdom of God *and* we are already participants in it.

And this Kingdom of God is today most tangibly visible in the church. Here we are in the workshop of the Father. We worship him, and in the process, He forms and shapes us in the midst of this community.

So, God's new creation is visible today in all places where the people of God meet and serve our Lord. It is already visible in your acts of love, and peace, it is tangible where you experience true joy and kindness, it is experienced and seen where we serve one another.

And therefore it is also a reality in your personal life. Being connected with God through Jesus Christ in his Church of course impacts your inner life and your actions, your whole being. You are a new creation because you belong to the new humanity that Jesus our Lord has initiated and that He continues to build. You are part of his church, the church that has Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of God's new humanity -at the center.

But. But. If we were only 'new', I am not sure we would need a period of Lent. But we still have many things to deal with in our lives. We are people living in the in-between-land. We are really still very much part of the old humankind. Stuck in the middle, part of the old creation - normal people - and part of God's new people - a new creation.

We cannot deny that we are stuck in the middle - we have enough reasons again and again to confess our sins and admit our guilt as sons and daughters of Adam. Knowing that our Lord has forgiven our sins and that he is renewing us, actually gives us the mental freedom to be honest about the dark sides in our life.

With David in Psalm 32 we pray,

I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord."
And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

As people of God we never cease to be pulled between living for God and our neighbour - and living for our own self. So we will never stop praying that he forgives our trespasses. The fact that we belong to the new creation is only very slowly having its impact on our daily lives - and this process of growth and renewal will only end when we stand before our Lord in eternity.

3 You shall reign in life

But we are a new creation and the process of renewal is real, nonetheless. In spite of many setbacks.

Paul sums it up in Romans 5, in the passage we have read.

Adam brought sin, judgement and condemnation into humanity. We are all part of the same family of Adam, and both through his DNA if you like and because of the habits within the family, all people behave like Adam. It is not all bad, there is much goodness. But we all have this strong tendency, there is this gravitational force that draws us away from worshipping and loving God.

And look at our relationships with other people. These are marred by a lack of love.

So God is fully justified to judge and to condemn us. God is life and anyone who distances himself from God, distances himself from life.

St Paul summarises our normal human existence. The ultimate result of our rebellion against God, he says, is that "death exercised dominion." We all die physically and after that, we all have to face the show when we meet with God.

Life is great - but the misery of death that will certainly come, hangs over us like a very dark cloud that is about to pelt us with massive hailstones. We love life, but death defines it and colours it black all the time.

The Gospel is, that God has given humankind this gift, this gift of himself. Because of the perfect life of Jesus Christ, we are part of a new humankind and God no longer sees us as children of Adam, but we are children of God. We are part of the family of Jesus, and so, goodness, his deep perfection, is ours in the eyes of God. We have been justified.

Sin and guilt, judgment and condemnation are the key words in the family of Adam. But in the family of Jesus Christ, key words are forgiveness, and justification, acceptance, love. For God, you are right. His embrace is tight.

Under Adam, "death exercised dominion." Death ruled.

Under Jesus Christ, life exercises dominion. Life rules! Well, that is what you would expect Paul to say, but he does not.

Under Adam, in the old mankind we are part of, death rules

In the new mankind, for those who follow Christ, "you [Christian] exercise dominion in life". You rule in life!

The echo of Adam in paradise is clear. Mankind was supposed to have dominion in life - to rule the earth in obedience to God. And by his obedience, Jesus Christ leads us back to this state of bliss and perfect union with God.

But practically speaking, how do we 'exercise dominion in life'? Big words... and to a large extent, this is future music.

But there is a difference, even today. Sin and guilt, judgment and condemnation make us go through life with depression, bend forwards, shoulders down, with fear for God and death. Even fear for other people.

If we know Jesus Christ, the source of all life, and we know how He brought us back in the loving arms of God our Father, if we know that our sins are forgiven, that we are part of Gods New Creation - if we know all this:

...then we can straighten our back, with no fear for God or for people, or for death, or for life; and we are actually able to organise and sort out our life as free people. We can breath freely and enjoy life!

David experienced this: In Psalm 32 he writes,

You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.

Conclusion

Let us in this confidence of God's favour enjoy this season of Lent. With this freedom to live and this joy of knowing the love and forgiveness of God, we can actually look at ourselves without fear of what we see, and we can honestly notice to what extent we are still not perfect yet. It is exactly because we know we are a new creation, and that God favours us, that we can openly face our shortcomings.

God is not ready with us yet. There is much to do. But His work in our lives is based in love and forgiveness, not in judgement and condemnation. That is the great difference. And therefore we can stand in life with confidence, a confidence based on the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen