

Pako Evening Service: 20/11/2016;

Scripture Readings: Rom 4:1-12; 1 Cor 11:17-26; Sermon: "The blessings of the sacraments."

Congregation, a few weeks ago I emphasized the necessity for us as a church and as individuals to hold Scripture as the authoritative word of God above all else. I do so, for it is by the preaching of the Word that the Holy Spirit produces faith in the hearts of man. Romans 10:14-15 makes that very clear. "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

So when you hear Christian leaders saying that they converted "X" number of people, they are not only wrong, they are actually robbing God of his glory by saying it. No human being, however pious and upright, can take credit for the beginning of faith. It is and remains a gracious work of the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the Word. So that means a) preachers need to remain faithful to the Word, and b) preachers need to do their best in presenting an engaging and winsome message and not to be dull and boring.

Yes, I know God can use a crooked stick and a boring presentation to win people for himself, but I don't believe it is God's will that we should be totally boring. There is no excuse for that today. And yes, I know, there is no preacher who isn't boring sometimes! For us normal run of the mill preachers, it remains a work in progress. So it is by the word preached and made known that faith is created. Now once faith has been created, God has given us two further blessings to confirm our faith, namely the two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper.

However, the sacraments don't produce faith, they confirm it. When we administer the sacraments, they help us to understand more fully what God has done for us in Christ and hence they should not be neglected! The word "Sacrament" is a Latin word that means a "holy thing" with a hidden meaning. And this 'holy thing' is very important. In our understanding of Scripture, we say that sacraments are "holy signs and seals" to make us understand more clearly the promises of the gospel.

We call them 'signs and seals' for that is also what we find in Romans 4:11 where we read, "Abraham received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." Now please note. God sealed the righteousness that Abraham received in Gen 15:6, because Abraham had believed God's promise concerning his many descendants, with the very physical and painful sign of circumcision in Gen 17:26.

Please note. Circumcision did not add any holiness or more righteousness to Abraham. He was already righteous in God's sight because he believed God at his word! The circumcision clarified and certified that Abraham was righteous by faith. So you are not righteous in God's sight because of your baptism or your attendance at Lord's Supper. You are righteous in God's sight simply because you believe what God's word promises, namely, that there is forgiveness of sins and eternal life in His Son, achieved at the cross.

Therefore, when believers receive the sacraments, God does to us what he did to Abraham. He gives us a visible, tangible sign and a touchable assurance [a seal], that the promises of His word are true for us. And those promises center around the work of the Jesus Christ. Namely, when we by faith alone believe in Christ alone, we can be assured our sins are forgiven and we have the gift of eternal life. That is the promise of the gospel. So what God promises in His word, in the gospel, is confirmed by the administering of baptism and the Lord's Supper. So both the Word faithfully preached and the sacraments faithfully administered, coming together, bring the one message from God that all who believe in the completed work of Christ will be saved.

Now the administration of the sacraments does not make God's word more trustworthy. When God's word says that it is only through the death of Jesus that believing sinners are saved then we need to believe it. We don't have to add the sacraments to make that more true! The intended purpose of God's Word and the use of the sacraments is that we focus our faith in the finished work of Christ and nothing less or more. The finished work of Christ revealed clearly in God's word, is not dependent or become more-true or more-believable on the promises we make as parents when we bring our children for baptism or the promises we make as adults being baptized or our attendance or non-attendance at the Lord's Supper.

So if the sacraments are given to confirm our faith then it is necessary that we can see them, touch them and sense them so that our inward faith may be strengthened. The early church fathers defined the sacrament as a "visible sign of an invisible grace." That is a beautiful one-line definition. The invisible grace is what has been achieved by Christ's sacrifice

on the cross. And the sacraments confirm visibly what has been achieved by Christ's sacrifice on the cross as promised in the Gospel. That is why we use water in baptism and the bread and wine at Lord's Supper. That is why they are called visible signs and seals because things they signify are invisible. So the Holy Spirit produces faith by the preaching of God's Word and the use of visible holy sacraments confirms our faith.

Now that inevitably leads to another question. Why do we need the sacraments since we already hold up God's word as 100% truth and trustworthy? Doesn't that show weakness and lack of trust? Well, yes and no. Yes, God's word is 100% trustworthy! But Lord Jesus also knew our weakness. The writer of the Belgic Confession states in Art 33 that God added the sacraments to the gospel "mindful of our crudeness and weakness." God in His grace gives us these signs and seals for He knows that we are slow learners. Even though God's Word is sure and 100% reliable we tend to doubt! We are so often disobedient and lacking in trust. And God knew that, so He graciously allowed two visible sacraments to confirm our faith.

The first is baptism and it has taken the place of circumcision. We can read about baptism in Mat 28:19-20; "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The second sacrament, the Lord's Supper, Jesus instituted at the last supper. We read in Luke 22:19 that we are to celebrate this supper "in remembrance of Christ." Sadly, these two sacraments are still not enough for some. Some churches have as many as seven. Along with baptism and the Lord's Supper, they add, "confirmation [receiving of the Holy Spirit], penance [forgiveness of sins], ordination, extreme unction [the last rites to the sick and dying], and matrimony [marriage].

Now some churches have done this, because obviously they have a vastly different understanding of Scripture and some see the church and particularly the clergy as the means God uses to confer grace on his people. And when you think that through a little, it leads to the conclusion that the Church and its clergy are necessary for the salvation of its members. But what they are at the least suggesting is that they don't trust God's word when it says that the Scripture's alone are enough to make us wise unto salvation

Paul speaking to Timothy says, "and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15) Of course there are others whose whose doubt and lack of simple trust in God's Word causes them to think up all sorts of weird and wonderful signs of God's trustworthiness, often all in the name of the Holy Spirit!

They like to see something spectacular and are looking for more proof that the promises of the Gospel are real. That's why we have to deal with some of these strange phenomena's which they say happen because of the Holy Spirit doing an extra 'work,' but they have no warrant from Scripture at all! When I walk down the street at Pako, I come across the sign, "worship services at 10.00, healings rooms at the back. Strange. I have had people tell while I was at College that I should pray for the second blessing of the Holy Spirit.

What they said was that you weren't a proper Christian if you couldn't speak in tongues! But with respect, we don't need these extra things. There is no warrant in Scripture for them. So don't be hood winked into thinking that you're not a proper Christian. God's word clearly says that His word alone is able to make us wise to salvation. Now there are probably many reasons why people insist on these extra things, but one answer is that these people no longer trust or believe in the promises in God's Word nor what the two sacraments confirm for us. But congregation, we don't need to doubt the Word of God. I am sure that God must be frustrated by our lack of obedience and trust in His Word sometimes.

Thankfully, God doesn't say, "forget it, they're hopeless." Rather God goes the extra mile! When God made his promise to Abraham He swore by his own name for there was no one greater! "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants" [Heb 6:14]. That is also why our judicial system calls on witnesses to swear by almighty God. There is simply no one greater for God cannot and does not lie. And even though God's Word does not need such an oath, God still swore an oath to himself. The visible sign and seal of the sacraments is God's oath to us that both the Word and the Sacraments are intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation.

Let me mention two more things. First, are we to conclude that participation in the sacraments indicates true faith? "No!" Our practice in the Christian Reformed Churches has not always underlined the importance of this teaching.

Many years ago people thought that their participation in the sacraments guaranteed them some place in heaven. Even though people neglected to attend worship several Sundays running, they always popped up when Lord's Supper was celebrated. The same can be said concerning baptism. Some couples are never seen in church, yet when the wife is seven or eight months pregnant, you see them regularly. Well you don't have to be a genius to work out why! Paul warns that participation in the sacraments doesn't guarantee automatic entry into heaven.

Of the OT people he writes, "They were all baptized into Moses, the all drank the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink" – [so in a manner of speaking they had the two sacraments,] "Nevertheless God was not happy with most of them. Their bodies were scattered over the desert" (1 Cor 10:2-5).

There is no mystical power attached to the sacraments. They will not bring us to heaven on their own. On their own they are meaningless. They only become meaningful when they confirm the faith that we have been given by believing in the promises of Gospel contained in the Word of God. Without faith in the promises of the Gospel they become a work and all our works done without faith in God and his redemptive work, are like filthy rags!

Second, there are some Churches who have to struggle with the question of celebrating Lord's Supper every week because that is what some people are seeking. John Calvin was keen on weekly celebrations and saw it as defective of the then church not doing it more often. In itself, I don't see too much wrong with weekly celebrations. However, I see a lot wrong with it when the preacher is asked to shorten his messages from God's Word so that the sacraments can be done weekly! Furthermore, if proper oversight is to be given, weekly celebration becomes very problematic, and that was also why the reformers settled on four to six times a year.

In closing, allow me to reiterate – without the preaching of the Word the Holy Spirit cannot produce faith in the hearts of the people. Without faith the sacraments are meaningless. May the Lord grant us wisdom as we seek to give the Holy Spirit opportunity to produce faith in God's people by the preaching of the Word. May our use of the sacraments confirm the promises of the gospel.

That Jesus the Son of God, was born of a virgin, lived amongst us, died on the cross, rose victoriously from dead, so that those who believe may know our sins are forgiven and we have the gift eternal life in glory! Amen!