

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Last week, Maxi and I spent a few days in the Kruger National Park. While preparing my sermon for today, I began to wonder whether humans are nothing but animals. A professor of biology once told me that the human being is nothing but a beefed-up baboon. Is that true?

Higher animals have three important instincts. The first two are **feeding** and **breeding**. These two instincts are of vital importance for all living things, because without feeding no creature can live. Without breeding the species (for instance elephants) cannot survive. [1]

Animals make sure that they get their share. When lions have made a kill, each lion swallows as much as possible as fast as possible. Small lion cubs quickly learn to be extremely greedy. There are other lions who want the best pieces. Hyenas, jackals and vultures congregate and try to get their share.

Humans are also animals. They could not survive without feeding and breeding. But humans are also meant to be different. They are supposed to master their instincts, not to be enslaved by them.

When humans cannot stop craving and grabbing, whether sex, or food, or money, or nice clothes, they remain at the level of animals. They have not become truly human.

In fact, they are less than animals, because they always want much more than they really need. Animals only eat when they are hungry; they only have sex when it is the right time to conceive. It is typical for humans that they can get enslaved by their instincts – which is not the case in other animals.

Then there is a third instinct: to escape from danger. They call it the **fight or flight** syndrome. When somebody or something threatens you, you get a fright. Your body releases hormones that make you highly alert. All your energy is channelled into your muscles. [2]

An animal will fight when it is stronger. If it is weaker it will run away. For both it needs strong muscles. Fright – fight – flight. That is the instinct that all animals have built into their system.

Humans are no exception. It is an important instinct because without it humans cannot survive, when faced with extreme danger.

But again humans can be less than animals. When a kudu bull gives up the fight and runs away, it is left alone by the dominant bull.

But humans can become vindictive. They can hate each other. They can be overcome by anger and rage. They can lose control of themselves. They can become more brutal than animals.

That is why we need a constitution, a bill of rights, a code of laws, a police force, judges and prisons. Animals don't need all that. It really makes you think.

Humans can even turn against God, their Creator. They have killed Jesus Christ, the Son and representative of a caring and loving God. Our letter was written at a time of persecution. The followers of Christ were hunted down. No animal has ever done that. Paul encourages them to persevere. As we know it is not always easy to stand up for the truth. You can become very unpopular.

Why can humans become less than animals? Strangely enough it is because they are meant to be much, much more than animals. God created humans with a huge capacity that is supposed to be filled with God's own power to accomplish God's own creative and redemptive designs.

Animals have no goals, no visions, not ambitions. They follow their instincts. [3] Humans have a calling that goes far beyond their animal instincts. They are supposed to become representatives of God in this world. They are supposed to be caring and loving creatures. Humans are not supposed to be enslaved by their instincts, but to master them.

That has always been God's intention, Paul says, but humans took an awfully long time to realise it. It is in Christ that it has become as clear as the sun. But most people have not grasped it yet. They continue to serve their animal cravings. Even we Christians do.

As human beings we are able to have a vision. We can acquire knowledge and skills. We can be creative. We can work hard and make something out of our lives. We can build up our community. We are not meant to just live and enjoy ourselves as best we can. [4]

All humans have this immense capacity. But it can be left empty. Paul says it can be filled with a wrong spirit – not the spirit of power but the spirit of powerlessness. Remember there was a persecution. Paul reminds them that they have not been given the spirit of a coward. Cowards are people without spiritual power, without authority, without self-confidence in the face of suffering.

With the spirit of a coward you are unable to face challenges; you succumb to your desires; you become a victim of what other people say and do. You do not stand up for the truth.

The wonderful capacity of humans can be filled with a wrong spirit, the spirit of powerlessness. That is the bad news.

The good news is that God's power is already in us, although we may not be aware of it. We just need to activate its potential. Paul says that this power has been given to Timothy through the laying on of hands. He had been given a task to fulfil. We too were baptised and confirmed, God adopted us as sons and daughters of God, his representatives on earth. We have that mandate!

Now let me tell you a parable. The son of a very rich man reached the age of 21 and the father wanted to do something very special for his son. So he gave him a brand new 4x4. It was a beautiful car.

But it is not the beauty of the car that makes a 4x4 special. In fact such cars are usually quite clumsy and ugly. What makes a 4x4 special is something you cannot see, because it is hidden under the bonnet.

It is the power. Man, the engine of a 4x4 is something out of the world. When you press down the accelerator it roars like a lion. It can take you to high mountains and through desert sand.

But it will not do so, unless you activate it. This power is very patient. It does absolutely nothing, it waits for you to start the engine and engage the gears.

This is what the power of God in us is like – invisible and patient, waiting for us to activate and use it.

Now I tell you what. Our young man was not only spoiled beyond proportion; he was also enslaved by his desire for power. He wanted something he could smash to pieces without spending too much effort. The 4x4 was just not exciting enough. It was too much trouble, and too boring.

So he went back to his computer game. In a computer game you can blow up tanks and space craft and castles with the click of a mouse. And you can do so without punishment. So the 4x4 was left standing in the garage.

This is a parable for what happens with us. We miss our most wonderful potential. We don't activate God's power in us. We think we get more out of life if we ignore it and rather serve our instincts, our cravings, our pride, and our fear. [5]

God has not given us the spirit of a coward, Paul says, but the spirit of power, the spirit of love, the spirit of self-discipline. I have said enough about power and self-discipline; now let me say something about love.

This is not what we normally call love – which is, more often than not, nothing but sexual exploitation. What Paul speaks about is God's love, true love, creative love, caring love, responsible love.

The New Testament has a special word for God's creative and redeeming love – not *eros* (from which our word *erotics* is derived) but *agape*. Agape is best translated as responsibility. A mother takes responsibility for her child, whether it is attractive or not, whether it makes a nuisance of itself or not.

God accepts us although we are not acceptable and transforms us in his love. In fact, the least attractive people need the most love. The same is true when we take responsibility for the community, or the society. This is not fun. It is strenuous and taxing.

To love means to serve. And you really need God's power to serve. Christ had this power. If you always want to be on top of others, it means that you have no spiritual power. You are afraid that you will be trampled down, that you will miss out, so you always try to stay on top.

Christ, hanging at the cross, had the power of love, not the love of power. And today, two thousand years later, billions of people look up to that crucified man for strength and guidance. The high priest and the Roman governor, who

killed him, thought that they had the power to do so, but they have long become non-entities.

If you share the power of Christ, you will share the cross of Christ. There is no other way. Just think of the FIFA world cup once again. We sat in the grand stand or in front of the television screen and enjoyed the match from afar. But we were not part of it.

A true player will get kicked and bruised and exhausted. He expects this to happen; otherwise he would not be playing such a game. It is not important; what is important is to get the ball into the goal and go home with the trophy. This is true for every true Christian. Christians are not afraid to suffer for the truth.

One last thing. Paul says that Christ brought immortality to light. Now this is not our human immortality, because humans are not immortal. The Bible is quite clear about that. Adam and Noah and Moses and David all died. Lazarus had to die again after he had been resuscitated. Even Christ died, as did Paul and Peter and all the other disciples. God did not abolish biological death. All living things have to die.

Christ brought God's own immortality to light. By being the instrument of God's love, Christ shared in God's life and he still does so today. He is present among us even now in his Spirit. And as the text says, it is through the gospel we are invited to participate in God's own life, in God's creative activity, in God's redeeming love. This is how we share in God's own immortality.