

Sermon on Titus 2, 11-14, 12.02.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen

Text:

11)For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, 12)training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright and godly lives in this world, 13)awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, 13) who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Dear Congregation,

I know hardly anybody, who would voluntarily call himself pious. This always sounds as if one was not allowed to do anything and if faith were something quite terrible. I think that a sure method to make absolutely no one interested in our congregation would be, to let people sign a registration form where it says: If you want to belong to this congregation, you have to renounce all worldly passions and be sober and upright and live a godly life. The question would be, how many of us still sat here, if only such Christians would be tolerated here?

Are we pious, as the Letter to Titus formulates it, which we look at today on our journey through the Bible? Or do we not even want to be, as we immediately think of images and people, whom we would call “pious” in the worst sense of the word. No, perhaps, we do not want to be like those who, with exaggerated sincerity and consequently estranged from this world, reject everything that we – even though secretly – enjoy, is that not so? One is not allowed to do this, nor allowed to do that – moralizer of the first degree. Every one of us has met such a person at least once, and, as a rule, we do not remember this as a particularly positive encounter.

Still, today I set out to win back the concept of “pious”. I am tired of it, that such people – if they were pious or not, I do not know – have spoiled our own piety. I am also tired of it that people as Christians no longer want to claim that they were pious. Unfortunately, we have left this word to the critics of faith, and have lost everything that this word expresses as positive and desirable. But when I reflect on it, it is, actually indeed that, which differentiates us from Mr. average consumer, and that, which we all should strive for in faith.: Ultimately, we want to be pious people, or at least, try to become that. Why have we given up this word? Why do we actually shy away from the risk, that someone could say about us: This is a pious person?

Recently, a former President of the Federal Republic of Germany died, this is the highest representative of the state. I have followed this with the greatest interest, since I have met Johannes Rau personally and received a letter from him.. He was described as “pious”, and I do know why. He was someone who appeared totally human, without some great fanfare, and he could approach people. He was someone, who was competent and brought people together. His motto was: “Reconcile instead of divide”, and he has lived accordingly as a convinced Christian. It does not happen extremely often that politicians not only describe themselves as Christians, but also, indeed, conduct themselves as such. Johannes Rau was in this respect an example.

Why, then, should it be desirable to be pious?

In the dictionary one reads that pious means “god-fearing”, “faithful” and “dutiful to God”. It also derives from a word that can mean “advancing” and “useful”. This is, on its own merit, really nothing bad.

After all, it is about the relationship with God and what result it brings to my life. At some time, in church history, this honest word has become a term for religious sentimentality and then for sanctimonious airs.

And now, in our world today, we experience piety from its repulsive side. Not only among Christians, but also among other religions. Today, we no longer talk of pious believers. What the word “pious” formerly expressed, namely, that people take faith seriously, has become a travesty and unfortunately describes in every faith camp only a fundamentalist-fanatic attitude towards faith, which, unfortunately, discredits every religion, where this happens, whether Islam or Christendom.

Presumably, you all heard about the incident, where a Danish caricaturist has drawn Mohammed with a bomb on his head. Even though there is no place in the Koran, where the graphic portrayal of the prophet and founder of Islam is forbidden, this has led to much turmoil and demonstrations. Only in the so-called *Hadith*, which contains words and acts of the prophet, can be found a comment that painters and sculptors, who portray living beings, will be ordered on the last judgement day, to inhale life into these beings, and, as they are unable to do this, they will be punished and burn in hell. – For me this is still a strange notion, but, nevertheless, whatever turmoil and transgressions have taken place on Danish embassies in various Islamic countries, have, ultimately, nothing to do with the Koran, thereby, strictly speaking, also nothing with religion and by far nothing with the pious behaviour of Muslims.

I want to add, out of fairness, that the obtuse conduct of the right-oriented, Danish paper “Jyllands Posten”, the largest paper of Denmark, which has, for years, made immigrants responsible for all negative developments in the country, is truly not a chapter of responsible journalism. When I, indeed, know with certainty that I will hurt religious feelings, and when I, indeed, know that in Iraq, in Iran, in Lebanon and in Palestine people are being offended by this, who, in this respect, do absolutely not understand a joke, why, then, do I publish such drawings. Freedom of press or no, what does it mean?

As it looks, there are only extremes: There are either people who are overly pious, as mentioned, today we call them fundamentalists, or there are people, relatively believing what they may, whatever is “in” at the time. There is much spirituality or esotericism, but there are no longer very many, in a Biblical sense, “pious” people.

In a sermon I read recently:

Piety must not smell like mothballs or repeat on someone with moral acidity. To be pious is, moreover, a wonderful standard of living. It means a two-fold relationship: I know to be held and supported by God. Therefore, I freely approach others and want to be part of building God's world. To be pious is one's own inner freedom from all forces and judgements of the world. Even though advertisements constantly shower us with the contrary, the Bible says: It is not the most important thing in life, whether I have the super job, earn lots of money, drive a huge car and have a great figure. No. Christians know a contrasting program: You have your life's meaning herein, that God has said to you: do not be afraid! I am, indeed, here. And now make the best of your life. Whoever can live like this, is truly a free person.
(Bishop Margot Käsemann, Christmas 2003)

What would be so bad if we truly escaped the worldly passions like greediness, indecency or egoism? What would be so bad in leading sober, upright and godly lives in this world? After all, it is exactly that which we permanently expect of others. Actually, we cannot stand injustice – if it happens to us, I mean.

Is it not particularly our problem, that so very few pious people can be found today, who, with their search for justice, penetrate society like sour dough?

What I also notice in this paragraph of the Titus letter, which basically sounds the same and presumable has the same origin as the two Timothy letters, is, that in the end it speaks of the hope we have and which we can await. To be pious, does apparently not mean, making a constant effort to be a perfect person, that is a lost fight in any case, but it means, to live life through this great hope, namely the hope that Jesus Christ "... *who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.*

What constantly enervates me in fundamentalism is, that it does not bring forth any good works at all. What enervates me in Christendom is, that we, seemingly, have nothing to set against it, which could be an answer to the increasing radicalization of the world. We either make the same mistake or react with the same harshness, which only lengthens the disputes, or we are unsure and take off our make-up totally in the name of misunderstood tolerance of our Christian conviction. But we can be joyous, steadfast, sober, if we are only pious. It is really faith that gives us the strength to endure all the misery in this world, ultimately in the knowledge, too, and in the hope that until now, nothing was of duration, that has been in contempt of people and brutal. No matter how much one threatens and how much one curses, all regimes, that have acted with hostility and full of hate, have perished through their own ideology. I am certain, that all radical Muslims, exactly like the Christians after the Middle Age, must recognize that their holy scripture does not at all demand the killing of innocent people nor the conquering of all unbelievers, but even grant rights to those of different faiths.

And concerning us: We shall not become infected and retaliate in any kind. We shall shame the godless through loving actions or, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in a speech in 1934: Peace can only be won through God, by confronting aggression with prayer. Peace is risk, by taking away the power from those who tyrannize the world and give this power back to Christ.

Martin Buber gave the following quote: Rabbi Pinchas used to say "I am always afraid I could be more intelligent than pious." And then he added: "I like to be pious more than to be intelligent, but I prefer to be good rather than pious and intelligent."

Let us remember: To be pious as the attitude towards life.

The US-American researcher Robert Edwin Peary, who is said to have reached the North Pole on April 6, 1909, said, that the worst thing during this expedition was not the cold, but the darkness.

It would be terrible, if we, in all this coldness which people generate in our world in spite of the heated climate of aggression and retaliation, had no light which can lead us in all this chaos out there. Our light is Christ, who "*gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds*". Amen.

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.