

Sermon on Hebrews 12, 1-3, 26.03.2006

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:

1)Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2)looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.3) Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Dear Congregation,

In all the years as Pastor, I have seen it time and again that people have found the way to the Church. There were those among them, who stayed on and who have become involved and regard the Church as a part of their lives from that moment on. – However, there were also those who came for a few weeks or months. In conversations, it was apparent in most cases, that they went through a life crisis at that time and needed the support of faith to find new courage. But then, they disappeared again. Attempts to stay in touch with them failed. I have called them on the telephone or sent e-mails, but in most cases there was no reaction. Rarely, I have had the opportunity afterwards to inquire once more, and it was never the case that the congregation was the reason. The reason was the people themselves. They either have not searched for what they hoped to find; this can happen. Or they felt that they could now manage on their own and were no longer dependent on the help of the congregation. At first, one tries to find out if anybody has actually said the wrong word, or someone has offended these people somehow. And if I know that people simply return to a life without Church, then I feel truly sorry. I never know whether these people have really been able to develop closeness with God, or whether they have truly experienced that God has an interest in them. And, of course, every time I ask myself, whether we could have done more. Perhaps you react like I do, there always remains such a strange feeling.

God for certain occasions, God for life crises, God when one needs him – this is what many people of our time think. A baptism, a marriage, a funeral, and then, out of sight, out of mind. I find this such a pity, for I am convinced that all people need God – and, in fact, not only at certain times in life.

This, however, does not just apply to today. It has always been like that. We look at the Letter to the Hebrews today. This letter is a sermon, which, to a great extent, revolves around texts from the Old Testament. At that time already, the goal of this letter was to urge people forcefully, not to turn their back to faith, not to risk salvation in Christ which they have experienced once before. This idea is developed in chapter 6 as follows:

1)Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God ,2)with instruction about ablutions, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement. 3)And this we will do if God permits. 4)For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5)and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6)if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. 7)For land which has drunk the rain that often fall upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. 8) But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned. 9)Though we speak this, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things that belong to salvation. 10)For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love

which you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. 11) And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end 12)so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the goodness of the word and the powers of the age to come and then commit apostasy...

I don't know about you,, but if I have once eaten something that tasted really good, then I simply want to eat it again, right?

It does not make sense to let go of something good, to lose something again, that one has finally found, something one has chased, to let loose again.

How is it that this still happens? Is it laziness? Is it that something so new and unaccustomed, suddenly turns old and one loses interest? Is it that one needed God only for a very short time and then can do very well without him again?

Of course, one has to be careful not to consider this problem to be only a problem of other people. To a smaller extent, it is the same with us, too. Even though we perhaps come to Church regularly, we often say good-bye to our faith just as regularly and forget what a sweet and wonderful meal we have tasted through faith, and, strangely, we exchange this "six course menu" from God for the dry toast of everyday life.

In another paragraph, the Letter to the Hebrews gives a very good explanation that this happens. In chapter 12 it says: *1)Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2)looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.3) Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.*

Faith is a struggle. Life is a struggle. Unfortunately, one cannot always choose what one wants. We wish for this: We do not want to struggle, because it tires us quickly. We want to lead a carefree life and we are glad when it does not take too much effort. But it is rather the case that also faith has to prove itself in this struggle, in this chaos which surrounds us daily. Faith does not take place outside of this struggle, but is that, which we must use to defend ourselves.

Recently, I read something by Helen Keller. Helen Keller, some of you have surely heard of her, had to learn with great difficulty how to communicate, after she lost her sight and hearing through illness. This happened through the touching of things and the finger alphabet, which was tapped into her hand by her teacher and friend Anne Sullivan Macy. The breakthrough happened – I don't know if you are aware of this – with the word "Father".

Dear Congregation,

If you were blind and could suddenly see, would you then wish to be blind again? If you had been deaf and could hear again, would you then wish back your deafness? If the word "Father" is the first word that suddenly breaks through the thick wall of silence and isolation, would you ever forget this word?

I want to clarify with this example two things:

First, that the struggle, to master life, will, eventually, level the road to God. As a rule, all of us have been like Helen Keller learning to hear and see God's glory and reality. It is not that we have always and forever had conviction and faith. This is rather the exception than the rule. But at one time, there is a point for all of us, when we deal with God. When we truly experience God, and from the bottom of our heart say this word "Father" to God for the very first time with full conviction.

But – and this is the second point – as a rule, we fight a battle not only that we somehow find our way through life and stand up in life, but at the same time we fight a battle against forgetfulness. How easy is it to let such an experience in faith fade away again? At one moment we are still so intimate with God, feel his closeness and are glad to have finally come to God through faith, and then the next thing happens – bang – we are back again where we were before, searching, insecure, going astray, in the dark.

Helen Keller wrote: "If a door of happiness closes, then another opens. But we look at the closed door for such a long time that we do not even notice that another one has opened."

In our house, we leave the doors open. And, honestly, one only notices that there is a door when it is closed. As long as it is open, as long as one can go through, one no longer realizes it is there. If it is closed, then one asks why it is closed. For people who have found God, it is, as if a door opens which will never be closed again, but which we do not even notice any more. But instead being happy about this open door, we constantly think about the doors which have been closed.

1) Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2) looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. 3) Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

One needs patience and perseverance, when one wants to come through the struggle which is intended for us. This is not a battle where one victory suffices. If we truly want to remain in faith, then we need to oppose forgetfulness with remembering. If you read the Letter to the Hebrews, you will find out, how much rummaging takes place in memories, just to supply people with facts that show them, how immensely important faith is. What about the people of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses? What about Jesus?

Here, too, in this paragraph, it says: Look to Jesus, pay attention to him. He also could have made his life quite easy and swim with the current. Why the suffering, the pain, the cross – what for? He, however, chooses something else, in order to sit to the right of God's throne. Remember, it says here, that he has endured the hostility of other people. Why should we? So that we gain strength from it, and swim against the current in the fun society, not immediately give up on faith again when things go well, and use it perhaps only then, when we need God.

It is about a life in faith, not a life with a little more or a little less faith. It is about God's love which can always help us, no matter whether we want to hear or see this. Even then God still taps his name into our hand, so that we, at some time, through our thick wall of laziness and distraction from faith, will say this one, decisive word that we then, hopefully, never forget again: "Father"! Amen.

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