

Sermon on 2. Corinthians 4, 16-18, 07.05.2006

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

Text:

16) So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. 17) For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18) because we look not at the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, for the things that are unseen are eternal.

Dear Congregation,

The topic of the fourth chapter of the second Letter to the Corinthians is more or less the question, what energy the Gospel radiates. What does the gospel accomplish in difficult times? What can the faith in Jesus Christ give us, if everything else is really a struggle?

That especially Paul occupies himself with this topic, may sound ironic at first glance. For it is particularly this faith, particularly this gospel, this message of Jesus, which presents all these problems to him, which also appear in this letter. How can something, for which he was even tortured, imprisoned and beaten, unfold at the same time such a great power, that lets him say: All our sorrows are not compared to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

That may sound like a contradiction.

Yet Paul knows, of course, the gospel challenges people to distinguish between what we experience in life or through the cruelty of other people and that, what God has in mind for us. It is exactly about this, so Paul explains to us here, that we do not confuse the sorrows of our human life, which doubtless exist, with the eternal magnificence of God. This is the exact point, not to reduce that which we can see to a common denominator which that we cannot see, that one does not identify God with the circumstances and faith with suffering we endure, for then one would have a mixture which is frightening.

It is really not God who finds joy in cruelty, but it is the people who do this to each other. It is not the case that the truth of God puts us into prison as it happened to Paul and others in the history of Christendom, and not at last also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose 100th birthday we remember this year, but it the making of people who are, exactly by this truth unmasked, questioned, denounced, and whose intolerance is responsible for people like Paul to be persecuted.

And this differentiation is important to Paul, because he has to do with people, who, as new Christians, are frightened of what may happen to them. His advice is basically: Do not just look to the things you go through or that cause you tribulations, do not just think of your burdens and problems, but remember that which goes far beyond this life, remember God, who, he says so in this chapter, has not only given us a light into our hearts, but also gives us the magnificence which is far greater and more beautiful and even lasts forever than all the hardship which we go through here, which has a time limit and is not the whole truth, which we encounter in God.

When I was a child, I had to go, as all children, to the dentist, because my genetic make-up in this respect is not good, and I had to submit at an early age to all kinds of dental treatments. I found this, of course, terrible, and after the first time the drilling hurt, I did not want to go back, of course. Now there was a toy shop on the way to the dentist's office, and I still remember my mother saying: "When we come back from the dentist, you can chose something from here." The drilling did not hurt any less, the visit to the dentist was still

terrible, but the prospect of a new toy car has helped me to tolerate the 20 minutes in the dentist's chair much better, for my thoughts, while I still sat there, were already occupied with the question, what I would choose this time.

I think this is a good example for what Paul wants to say here: It depends whether there can be something else to which we can look forward in our deepest despair. Is there something else that reaches beyond our often stressful situations, of which we can say: This is not nice what I have to go through, but I do also know that this is not everything, and that this grief and sadness, these health problems are not the sum of who I am and what I believe.

On our vacation in Germany, which has also led us back to our former place of work, I have heard of so many problems. People have approached me and have told me hair raising stories about illness, marital problems, fights and so forth. Sometimes I thought: This is almost incomprehensible what people must deal with in their daily life.

- A daughter lost her father after an organ transplant, because the organ donor had rabies and this was not recognized beforehand. There is someone waiting for a kidney, receives it and dies an extraordinarily cruel death, because the doctors were careless.
- Another woman has been beaten and raped by her husband for more than three years, and has finally had the courage to report him.
- Another woman has so many problems with her ex-husband after the separation, because he interferes with constant criticism in the preparations for their daughter's confirmation, and his threat that he would not attend, so that the girl is totally confused and cannot truly celebrate the most important event of her youth.
- Another woman has breast cancer, has always gone for check-ups to her doctor and has now had to undergo an operation with the removal of 19 lymph nodes, had already 6 chemotherapies and has to face still 28 radiation treatments.
- Another woman, who has also breast cancer, and has to make arrangements at the same time for her 18 year old daughter and her boy friend so that they can raise the child which the daughter expects.

These are examples of people who could certainly all say: I give up, that's enough, I have no idea how things can go on. I am not only tired, I am not only desperate, I am at my wits end.

Yet all these women have this in common that they try not to succumb to these situations. The daughter, whose father died after the transplantation, is now active in supporting relevant tests which can avoid such mistakes in the future.

The woman who was raped, goes to taekwondo, to build feelings of self worth and tries to finally get away from this man.

The confirmation of the girl is planned in such a way that other family members will arrive unexpectedly to give her support.

The two women who have breast cancer do not just give into their fate, but do what they can to gain strength; one has a tremendously positive attitude towards life, the other tries to see in the multitude of her problems also the positive.

For me it is basically amazing that not all simply focus on that which burdens their lives at the time, but they all look forward and take strength from the fact that this is not all and will never be all. It will progress, in whatever way, and I want to make the best of my situation. I do not want to be content to mourn my

misfortune and my misery and feel sorry for myself, but I want to use the energy which I have to plan and to make preparations, and I do not want to believe that there is nothing more that gives me joy, but I want to perceive the beauty and the things I enjoy quite consciously.

Dear Congregation, as sad as that may be sometimes, and even though one stands aside and hears all these stories and can really not help, I am actually very glad and thankful that I have met all these people. I learn from this that life is still worth while, that never everything is bad, and that basically everything depends on us, how we meet the challenges life presents us.

I experience that people find support in faith, have hope, which gives them strength for this step forward and pervades all the difficulties.

I experience how important community is among people, where faith leads us, so that we do not have to go through hard times by ourselves.

I think anew about faith, which, no matter where we are in life, encourages us, and points not only to the present, but to eternity, to all that outlasts misery. Hardship will pass and in the end the good will always be victorious.

There is not only the dentist's chair, on which we sweat blood and water, there is also the toy shop, which helps us bear the unpleasantness, and then perhaps, our wish to lead a carefree and wonderful life will come true.

Amen.

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