

Sermon on Colossians 4, 2-6, 21.05.2006

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:

2) Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving; 3) and pray for us also, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ on account of which I am in prison, 4) that I may make it clear, as I ought to speak. 5) Conduct yourself wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. 6) Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer every one.

Dear Congregation,

Presumably we all know what thoughtless words can cause. A false word, an angry remark, a letter, can have destructive consequences. I am fairly certain that we have already stood on both sides of this problem. Words of this kind have been thrown into our faces, but, of course, we, too, have let fly such sentences and words, which we have, in the meantime, regretted many, many times.

All the more astonishing it may sound, that the sermon text for this Sunday “Rogate”, gives us the following tip: *6) Let your speech be ... seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer every one.*

In German we talk of a “salted speech”, here, in Canada, we may say a “peppered speech”, meaning that someone actually tells us very clearly what he thinks.

And here, dear Congregation is the first problem, which we have with our remarks and exactly where we could misunderstand this text.

We live at a time where we have been trained to state our opinion. We are supposed to be open and honest, we should not keep our opinion hidden, and however, we think that we thereby also have the right to throw everything into people’s faces.

“I really don’t understand why he is in such a huff, I have only told him my opinion. If he cannot take it, why, then, does he ask me for it?” – “She has asked me how she looks, and I have told her quite honestly: ‘Impossible!’ and she was beside herself, I really do not understand this, I have only said very honestly, what I felt.” – “I have asked him whether he still loves me, and he answered, not as much as in the beginning; that has totally disappointed me..”

Three examples that show, that in spite of all honesty, which I certainly regard to be appropriate, such honest statements can sometimes unfold particularly destructive consequences. As much as we Christians are supposed to tell the truth, here a problem comes to light, which we, through all our honesty, cannot solve, namely, how we say something and how, even fully justified statements, are being interpreted.

What I want to make clear is that we cannot simply, as true as it may be, throw something into someone’s face, burden him with it and then think we had nothing more to do with it. Unfortunately, we are not only responsible for what we say, but also how we say it. We also have, I think, a responsibility to think about how the other person may interpret it.

We live in a time, when people no longer want to take on this responsibility, when words have left the mouth, then it is the problem of the other person, the main thing is, we get rid of it, main thing, is we have blown off steam, the other person knows, where he stands, and what follows, is his or her problem. And when one looks at the text now, one could think that one should speak in as plain terms as possible, to make it unmistakably clear to the other person, where he stands. Therefore, I season my words with plenty of salt. What we like to ignore in reading this text is, that our words should, indeed, be clear and plain, but also friendly.

This is the meaning of the text that I must also think about the person facing me: Can he or she tolerate the truth? Am I seriously and truly looking for a dialogue, in which something that I did not like and about which I have to talk, can be changed? Briefly said: Is it only about me that I talk about, or is it also about the other person?

In our Bible circle we have recognized that the talk about the salted words reminds us of the Sermon on the Mount, where he tells us, that we are the salt of the earth. What this means is, that we should always be a living expression of our faith, and that the salt should then be a symbol of our being Christians and not alone of our explicitness. .

Do we talk like Christians among ourselves? Am I ready, at the moment I say something, to see the person across from me still as my brother or my sister? We should be able to answer each one accordingly, says the text. This, of course, would be the ideal case. Nor do I always know what I should say. In some situations, I, too, lack the words. In the Bible circle someone said, that it can also mean to close one's mouth at the right moment. One does not have to talk all the time. Sometimes, silence at the right time can be even more valuable.

This text, of course, contains much more, namely the question, how I should speak about faith. In this context it is also about finding the right words. Here, too, we have forgotten much, I find, because most people, who want to win others for faith, think, that one must only become immeasurably explicit and then it will certainly work. Many people who have an interest in faith, but, as this text says, are still on the "outside", have not considered themselves as believers, or perhaps, do still not know much about faith, are often repelled particularly because we come on like steamrollers. The motto is: "to convince at any cost", mission with the crowbar, the main thing to make Christians of them, no matter how, this is often the concept of our time, in Africa, in Asia, everywhere where at this time Christian churches "boom". But this is not a good recipe. It may however be the case that this takes people by surprise and they say at first: Yes, I believe. But the problem is really not the first step, but the road that follows. To become a Christian is simple, but to remain a Christian actually requires, that one gains an inner attitude by oneself and not only prays what someone else dictates.

The sermon text advises us to become wise and even tells us at the same time, how that happens:

3)and pray for us also, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ on account of which I am in prison, 4)that I may make it clear, as I ought to speak. 5) Conduct yourself wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. 6) Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer every one.

People shall pray that GOD opens a door in the other person, so that it becomes possible to make the offer of faith to the other person. It is not up to us to break down a door, but to wait for the right moment, when one can exchange experiences, or one gets the opportunity to tell someone how important faith is to oneself. It is about a secret, as it says here, which does not mean that faith is hidden in a mysterious way,

it lies in the open, in the light and everything one can know about faith, is written in the Bible; but it is about this, that the message which shall reach the people, is always still bigger than what we can say. For God it is always possible to open doors.

In Revelations 3, Christ says that he stands at the door and knocks.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me.

Even God does not simply break down locks and bolts with his message, but he knocks and waits, he has the patience that someone will be ready at some time to open this door to his heart, because God knows precisely, that it must also be about an inner readiness, so that his great message of his love can be understood and falls on fertile ground.

Dear Congregation,

To talk to each other about faith is not an easy matter. There is always the problem to be misunderstood; we always have difficulties time and time again, to find the right, the fitting words. Time and again we experience how little we have ourselves under control, and things that have come out of our mouth were often sharper than any sword. But herein, too, we can find advice and help in the Bible. It is, I hope, clear that we cannot circumvent the problem of a certain intuition or instinct. One cannot always say everything at any time, nor can one take people by surprise, but one needs patience with people. How does one manage this? By not just concentrating on that which one wants to say, but also gives thought to whom one says things. I think, what we can also learn from Jesus through his countless conversations with people is, that in spite of many differences of opinion, always love and understanding can still be felt. It is about the opened door, which we should not carelessly slam into somebody's face. It is about respect for one another and love, which especially in the Christian faith remains the highest commandment.

And if we do have to become particularly clear, then we should ask God for his help, pray that I can keep myself under control, remain friendly, not use a conversation to let off steam, ask myself, how what I say, would effect me. Sometimes it helps, when one does not say anything immediately, but sleeps a night over it, talks with someone else about how something can be said or whether that, which I want to say, can be accepted and understood.

I conclude with a nice saying which I have found:

With one single loving word you achieve more than with three hours of fighting.

(Josemaria Escrivá de Balaguer, 1902 – 1975)

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