

## Sermon on 1. John 1,5-2,6, 02.07.2006

*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:**

*5)This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. 6)If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; 7) but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8)If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9)If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10)If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. 1)My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2)and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. 3)And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. 4)He who says "I know him" but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; 5)but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love of God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: 6)he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*

Dear Congregation,

Eight times the word sin or sinning is used in this brief paragraph. I presume that to hear this once, it would have been sufficient for you as for me. One does not really like to be reminded that one is a sinner. It sounds very dramatic to speak of sin, it sounds serious. But, as a rule, we don't consider ourselves to be so bad. Surely, at times we are unfriendly perhaps or think badly of others, but people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century do not necessarily regard themselves as "sinners" any longer.

It is quite strange, but today the word "guilt" is preferred to the word "sin". One can become guilty towards someone or be guilty of something. That is still in order. But as soon as the word "sin" is mentioned, the situation becomes uncomfortable. Non-church goers or non-Christian people also understand that "sin" denotes more than interpersonal matters. Sin has something to do with God. To sin is something one cannot simply shake off.

"The church must always talk about sin" someone has said to me once. "This is terrible, for they just want to make us afraid thereby." – I know that formerly there was much talk about sins from this pulpit. Congregational members have often told me that they had not known that faith can be something liberating, something that can even be enjoyed.

Now we know how we feel when the talk is about sin, but what is sin? Our text makes a decisive statement: *God is light and in him is no darkness at all. 6)If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; 7) but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*

The meaning of this text is clear: As long as we are very close to God, there is less danger of sinning. Whatever we consider sin to be, it is easier to sin when we do not think of God, when we do not pay attention to him. The danger of sin exists, as the text says elsewhere, when we disregard God's commandments, foremost the greatest commandment, which is loving God and loving one's neighbour. Therefore, to be far away from God and sinning are closely connected. If one searches the Bible, one will discover that particularly in the Old Testament several terms are used, which are all, both in English as well as in German, interpreted as "sinning": be misguided, to rebel, to lose the way. And this makes it clear: To sin is, in its original meaning, the separation from God.

And in the conception of our sermon text it is expressed quite simply: Only he who remains in the light, can himself be light. The further one removes oneself from the light, which is God, the darker it will become.

I still remember when I was a child, the chimney sweep coming once a year, who had to pass through our rooms to get to the loft. Even though people said that he was a nice guy, which he probably was, and that he would bring luck, which I even then did not believe, I was afraid of him. First, because I did not know him, and second, because he was, of course, dressed totally in black. At a later time, naturally, I have realized that due to the soot and the dirt he wore clothing where dirt was not so noticeable. And that, then, was black clothing.

I do not want to offend chimney sweeps with what I say here, but I use this example to make it clear that, when wearing white or light-coloured clothes, one sees the dirt right away, of course,. The darker the clothing, the less obvious it is when one gets dirty.

Here in this text and also elsewhere in the Bible it is says, that Christ has washed us white in his blood (Revelations 7, 14).

*7) But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*

This contains two statements: Anyone who is considered a follower of Christ, becomes conspicuous when he sins. But it is evidently that there is the possibility, particularly in closeness with God, that sin will be forgiven. When people say: The church talks only about sinning, this is half the truth. The church talks about sin, to be able to speak about forgiveness in the same breath.

Christians should not walk in darkness. We are sinners, to maintain anything else would be by lying. But at the same time we are also told, as it says here, if we sin, we have an advocate in heaven, Jesus, who is the expiation of the sins of the world.

Time and again we prefer to stumble through darkness instead of walking in God's light. Our clothing, whitened with Christ's blood, gets dirty again and again, as much as we might take care. But God can set things right again, because he forgives us time and again.

A man sat at the window in a train compartment and dared not look at the passing landscape. He was alone in the compartment.

Years ago, he had to separate from his family – for he had come into conflict with the law, as it was so nicely termed. He had to protect his parents and siblings; even before everything became known, he had left them; since then he refused stubbornly to resume contact with them.

Guilt gnawed at him, he showed it: He could simply not rid himself of it. Well, he had served his sentence. But if he failed once, who could guarantee that he would not become weak a second time? Could he claim that he was a different person now? Did he really have a good chore? Or was the gnawing voice within him right?" You are and will remain a failure, a burden and shame for your family and for society?"

The man in the train, who was approaching a decision, heaved a loud sigh. He thought of his family at home, who had probably received his letter by now. He imagined the face of each individual, each one by itself. His father. His mother. His little brother (How tall would he be now?) His sister (Has she married in the meantime?). His uncle, who belonged to the family just as his cousin. He longed for his family. The years, when he avoided all contact with them, had been painful years. He wanted to save them from all embarrassment, but it had not been easy for him. Now, that he was on his way to them, he knew how much he had loved them the whole time. For the first time, words passed his lips: "O God, I hope they will not turn me away."

The train approached the place where everything would be decided. The man grew steadily more restless, now he looked out of the window, spellbound. He waited for the inevitable to happen: The rejection. He had written to his family that he did not want to impose on them if they did not want to have anything to do with him. He would pass their farm on the train, and also the tree where he had carved his name as a child. If they truly wanted nothing to do with him, they were to do nothing. He would pass that tree, cast an eye on it and continue on, further and further. He would never return.

However, if they would think there was a small chance that he could come to them – be it only for a few days – then they should fasten a coloured ribbon to the tree. He would see it, the train passed directly by the tree. And if there was really a ribbon in the tree, he would leave the train at the next station. Then he would return to them. If there was a ribbon in the tree, only then.

He could not see the tree yet. Only a few seconds remained. He clasped his hands. The train had just entered a curve and slowed its tempo. The old oak tree came into his view, the moment which the man had feared so much. He clasped his hands even tighter, when he saw the tree. Tears came into his eyes. He lowered his head, because he could not believe what he saw. He had asked them to hang a single coloured ribbon into the tree, if his family would give him one more chance. But there was not a single ribbon. No, the entire tree was hung with ribbons which fluttered in the wind like coloured birds; a hundred, perhaps even two-hundred ribbons, countless ribbons. The message was very clear: You shall not only have one chance. No, a hundred chances: Because we believe in the good in you. Because we believe in you.

God decorates our tree with countless coloured ribbons. He believes in us. Do we believe in him? If we believe only in ourselves, there are no coloured ribbons which assure us that we are forgiven. Forgiveness has to do with someone else forgiving us, we cannot do this ourselves. We need to be face to face with someone to whom we can confess our guilt, who, in spite of our sin, does not reject us.

What did Luther say in his first of the 95 theses: “The entire life of the faithful should be a single penance!” Part of penance is surely recognizing our guilt constantly anew and confessing it. However, part of penance is also God offering us time and again, to make us whole and pure. Therefore, the church not only calls us to baptism, to confirmation or to a single offer of the Holy Communion for forgiveness of sins. Therefore, the church wants to accompany us throughout our entire life and to lead us again and again anew to confess guilt, but also to receive forgiveness!

For this reason, the church talks of sin. Not to give us a bad conscience, but to free us from our bad conscience and guilt for a new life, a life in the light. Amen.

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