

Sermon on 1. Peter 3, 8-17, 07.09.2006

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

Text:

Finally, all of you have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind. Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary, bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing. For “He that would love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from sparkling guile; let him turn away from evil and do right; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those that do evil.” (Psalm 34, 13-17) Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? But even if you do suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a deference to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God’s will, than for doing wrong.

Dear Congregation!

In the German translation, the sentence “*Always be prepared to make a difference to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you*” appears twice in a row. And as I know the writer of the letter of Peter, it would not be an oversight by him to write this sentence twice. But why did he do it if not to put particular emphasis on this sentence? And why does one emphasize something? Because it is very important.

This idea is indeed truly essential for us Christians: That we can give precise information to every one who asks us at any time, what we believe in and what we hope for. I think that you agree with me, that the many other good ideas Peter has written down in this paragraph, can remain in the background – at least for this sermon.

Let us reflect on what the account could actually be, if someone asks for the reason of Christian hope. Let us pose this question as a very personal one: What would we answer, if someone wanted to know why we believe in Jesus Christ and hope for the resurrection and life in God’s new world?

We notice very quickly, that it is relatively easy to say something as a general explanation of faith and hope – perhaps we would attempt to speak as the Bible does: Why we Christians have faith and hope? Because God has sent his son into the world, or because we have the resurrection and eternal life through him. Perhaps we would even remember a few fitting Bible verses, for instance: “Jesus says, I live and you will live also!” (John 14,19). Or “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” (John 11, 25)

However, it is more difficult to formulate something personal, thoughts which come from our heart and express what touches our innermost, moves us and gives us support – in life as in death. Perhaps we now think, too, that we actually cannot express this at all in words. Or we would even say: What I believe in the depth of my heart and what I hope, is nobody’s business. This is a matter between my God and me, no one else’s!

Dear Congregation,

I think that Peter would have accepted that we perhaps lack the words, but he would not have accepted that we do not speak about our faith and our hope. This verse says very clearly, indeed, “*Always be prepared to make a deference to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you*”.

I always have to think of this: If Christians had not spoken of their faith and hope, then no one would have proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ to us, and where our Christian church stands today, perhaps something quite different would be here, probably a shopping centre!

However, the message of faith and hope must not always be a message of many words. This text also contains this idea: how we do or say something, is what comes across more clearly in most cases, than what we say in detail. Giving account of faith, shall happen in *gentleness and reverence*

- Do I say something with love or with a reproachful or accusing undertone?
- Do I talk only of myself or are faith and hope included in my speech as well as others?
- How do I speak of God, and how, perhaps in contrast, do I speak of others?
- Are these only empty phrases which I let out, and everyone notices that I do not stand behind them, or are they things that are said with deep conviction, with reverence for God?
- Is gentleness felt?

Dear Congregation,

This is not easy, but I think one can practice it and gain more assurance in how faith and hope can radiate from us.

I have just returned from the Synod yesterday, and I notice time and again how varied the notions can be, and how much Christians can treat each other with everything but gentleness and God-fearing at the same time (!) in controversies. There were controversies again this time, particularly around the state of affairs in the blessing of same sex life partners, a question, which now is to be decided on a congregational level, so that a decision is not made at the top, with which perhaps we, as Martin Luther Church, cannot live. Just by mentioning this topic, you can imagine how the emotions boil over. I do understand in this context, that people have very different opinions on such an obviously controversial topic. One cannot simply say here: This is the solution, that's the way we are going, even though many wish it could be so, perhaps also some of us.

But I think, particularly the complicated and controversial topics show, how strong faith and how strong also the effort is, to treat each other with gentleness.

One achieves nothing by being hostile, or by talking badly of each other. What would happen, if outsiders were present in such heated debates, or if conversations, which we Christians have among ourselves would be broadcast on television, what impression would that make? The disappointment among many non-Christians would certainly be great, that we treat each other often just as irreverently and with little gentleness as all others also do.

I think it is a very difficult, but necessary task within Christendom, to reach a certain form of unity, not by being always and at all times of one opinion – that does indeed not suit us as Lutherans, who have always been a church of disputes and also of differences in views. There is no Lutheran church where there are no differences of opinion. We have practically invented this concept, as we came into existence as a church through differences of opinions. I do not at all find this a drawback that we fight. If this happens among a few Christians, or in the congregation, one cannot expect that this could be

different in the church at large or in the Synod. When 418 delegates represent themselves and their congregation, you have already at least 836 opinions.

What we should now learn, according to our sermon text, is, to settle these differences of opinion as Christians and struggle for unity.

Our biggest weakness as Lutherans is that we always say, if I don't like this, I will go, or I won't even come. Many Lutherans misunderstand the priesthood of all faithful insofar as they think, they are allowed to be their own Pope – however, this is not so. We should all the clearer recognize, that Christ is the head, and all of us, as different as we look and think, belong to this organism of his congregation.

There was not only controversy at the Synod. There was at the end of a disappointing and burdening day for some, an evening prayer, where indeed all who had previously attacked each other, came together in a chapel on the grounds of Waterloo University to praise God.

This, for me, is the gravity of faith, where in spite of antipathies, which sometimes separate people, God creates unity, when we, no matter who we are, what we think or what we do in our bedroom, sit in the church pew side by side and can be the body of Christ.

Sometimes I ask myself, who we are that we allow ourselves to think differently from Christ, who calls us to his table today, as in former times, when he brought sinners together in one place, and wants to have communion with us?

Have a good conscience, writes Peter, and in this context it means, that one does not have to regret that, which one has not done with gentleness and love, when others address this or catch us.

Our Synod has decided, to be a Mission church for others in the next two years.

I find this to be an important topic, because I agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who has said, that whether the church is a church, is decided on whether it is a church for others.

It will also be a good experience for us in our congregation, when we deal once again consciously with this topic. We are, in comparison to other congregations, on a very good road. We do very, very much for others. However, I think it is good when we understand that this is our duty as Christians in the world and how much we, through relatively manageable projects, make a real difference to people who suffer in and from this world.

Always be prepared to make a difference to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you.

In the end effect, our faith is about how much we hope, and how much this hope which we have for others and for ourselves, radiates from us. It is very easy to let the problems of our own life and of this world overwhelm us. But it is not the goal of our faith, to go through life as pessimistic and angry persons, but as lighthouses of faith, as walking posters of our faith's good message of hope.

Let us radiate hope in what we do. This is and will be the question posed to us, and it will show whether we live and act in faith and in reverence in this world.

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