

Sermon on Genesis 12, 1-4, 16.07.2006

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

Text:

1)Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2)And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3)I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves. 4)So Abram went, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

1. God does not give up hope

Dear Congregation,

many of us know the beginning of Abram’s story. It is the beginning of God’s story with the people of Israel and in many respects a turning point.

Particularly because the previous experiment “human being” had not been especially successful.

- There were Adam and Eve. They simply could not check their curiosity. The tree with the fruit was too tempting. In the end, the fruit was of a very high price. Their disobedience towards God has cost them the paradise. They had to leave it.
- There was Cain, whose love for his brother was not strong enough to bridle his envy. Envy becomes hatred. The first murder occurs in the history of mankind.
- Mankind multiplies and apparently its malice, too. God puts an end to it through the flood. Only the righteous Noah and his family escape.
- God promises, never to destroy mankind as such again. It appears, as though people exploit the newly won freedom. They erect a building that is higher than anything else that exists. Their sole interest is not to build a skyscraper, but to make a name for themselves. Their sin is arrogance and vanity. As all people before them, they ignore God, who sets an end to this undertaking by confusing all their languages.

These stories are not told as historic events, but as a general judgement all of people, wherever they are, whenever they live. People are disobedient towards God, that is the judgement of these first eleven chapters of the Bible. And only thanks to God’s patience and love we are still here.

All this directly precedes our sermon text. From here on, the tune is changed. No longer is it about mankind being bad through and through and their few laudable exceptions, but about God using a different strategy, in how his commandments and faith are spread among mankind: God chooses one individual person and blesses him.

If you will: **God starts a new experiment – with Abram.**

Two things in this context:

a) He blesses Abram.

Blessing is God’s charitable action for the person who is blessed. Through a word, through a gesture like the spreading of the arms or laying on of hands, this blessing is dispensed. Blessing is something that is not only good for the moment but people should be assured from that moment of being blessed: You are not alone, God is with you!

Therefore, we, in our tradition, do not bless objects. People have asked me before to bless all kinds of things: A dog, a fire engine and residence. I have, then, said a prayer for those who lived in the residence, who had a friend for life in the dog, or saved lives with the fire engine. We bless people, not

objects, and do this, for instance, at a baptism, confirmation, wedding, in sickness and also when people have died, the so-called “commendation”.

Blessing is given at the junctions of life, at special circumstances and at the end of the church service, so that all concerned are being told clearly to hear and experience: God is with you!

We need this just as Abraham needed it at the time, so that we can go our way with trust in God and can meet the challenges of life. Blessing is not a cure-for-all, but the centre of God’s assurance that he is present.

God blesses Abram as he also blesses us. God chooses Abram, as he has also chosen us through Christ. When we read Abram’s story, it contains also the message for us that God needs people in order to do his work among us and build his kingdom.

b) The second idea that moves me in this story is: **No one is too old for God!**

I do not know whether you still remember, when, a little over a year ago, Joseph Ratzinger was chosen as the new Pope: Immediately afterwards, two items were discussed in the press. First, that it was now a German Pope, and second, how long he may be able to be Pope, after all, he was already 78 years old.

In our society, elderly people are no longer regarded capable. With 65 one is considered passé, in German we say “old iron”, which is nothing else but a kind description for the word “scrap metal”. And many elderly people even feel that way. We live at a time, where we strangely demand the same of all people, without realizing that people of different ages can also do different things. Indeed, it is not that older people must accomplish as many things or as quickly as the young. Why should they? I think it is about recognizing that every age has its certain focal points, which, taken by themselves, have immense value.

Frequently I have the feeling, that older people have been taken in by society’s fixation on youth, so that they no longer have confidence in themselves. One fruit of old age is experience. One has, indeed, experienced things so many times, which may appear new to younger people, that one can judge from experience what the result will be and what perhaps can be done.

Have you noticed how Abram reacts to God’s instructions? How does he respond to the fact that he is to begin the life of a nomad with his 75 years, which means, leaving his home, destroying the bridges behind him, giving up his daily routine? What does he say? – Nothing. He says absolutely nothing. God speaks and Abram goes. He does not offer apologies or excuses, he does not make himself appear unworthy, he does not doubt his instructions.

There is a key-lock principle, which allows that, also in God’s story with people, it is not solely about what we consider a perfect solution, but what God entrusts to the individual person. God creates opportunities – he blesses those who get involved in his opportunities.

What is needed to get involved in God’s opportunities? – Trust. That means nothing else but to be in the clear with God. We cannot have trust in someone, when we do not believe that he will bless and indeed accompany us on the road we take.

Many elderly people quarrel with God. The longer they live, the more impatient they become. They grieve over missed opportunities and also over their past youth. They live in the past, not in the present, and definitely not in the tomorrow, because that could be the time when death is awaiting.

Abram, however, has a characteristic, which actually should grow stronger with increasing age: Composure. He knows what life was and he also knows that tomorrow will definitely not be the same as today. Yet, he trusts in God, that he can judge and form today as tomorrow according to his will and order.

Composure means also to accept things as they are. To face limitations as well as to accept them, and to seize opportunities. A way to learn composure is to exchange the question: What was it like? with the question, How is it today?

I found a re-writing of the beatitudes, which are probably spoken from the heart for some elderly people:

- Blessed are those who show understanding for my stumbling foot and my limp hand.
- Blessed are those who realize that my ear has to strain to pick up everything that is said to me.
- Blessed are those who seem to know that my eye has become dim and my thoughts slow.
- Blessed are those who never say “You have already told me this story twice today”.
- Blessed are those who know how to awaken pleasant memories in me.
- Blessed are those who let me realize that I am loved, respected and not left alone.
- Blessed are those who, in their grace, ease my days which are left to me on my way to my heavenly home.

Abram is composed, and I think, this composure comes about where people have faith and trust in God; but also where there is a community, in which the generations want to live together and learn from each other. I wish for a society in which the elderly are allowed to be old and no longer have to be young desperately, in order to be esteemed. I wish for a society, which lends dignity to age and cares for people in their last phase of life.

I wish for a togetherness of the generations, where one considers life to be a road and development, where, as on every road, there is something to discover in every phase.

I wish for us to unlearn owning the truth, and in togetherness, in conversations with each other, go in search for solutions to problems; that would save the elderly from being considered written off, and the younger to be patronized.

I wish for a society in which we give back dignity to people and do not reduce them solely to their deficits. I wish that we see life, regardless of age, as valuable and enriching and beautiful, and refrain from setting up immovable limits between valuable and worthless.

God’s blessing, it appears, is not something that is reserved for a certain group, but can strike everyone at anytime. God cares for neither old age nor youth, neither sick nor healthy, neither capable nor weak. God only cares whether people trust in him.

Paul writes one day about Abram, that he did not become righteous through deeds, and then he repeats a sentence from the Book of Genesis “Abram believed in the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15, 6). *Amen.*

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