

## Sermon on Isaiah 49, 1-6, 08.10.2006

***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:

*1) Listen to me, O coastlands, and harken you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. 2) He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. 3) And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." 4) But I said "I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God" 5) And now the LORD says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength – 6) he said: "Is it too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

For a long time, I have avoided the roller coaster. I did not like it as a child; but at one time, when I had children of my own who wanted to ride on it at an amusement park when they were old enough, I pushed myself and went along. In the meantime it is alright, I have no great fear any more. But still, there is a part of the ride which I find most disagreeable: Namely, when the car is pulled up a steep incline at the beginning of the ride. What I find disagreeable is that the whole time we go up, I know exactly that after arriving at the top, the downhill trip is just as steep.

Dear Congregation,

Have you not also experienced that your life was going uphill, but then, quite suddenly, it went down a steep hill? Do you know the feeling when something begins fantastically and then turns into a disaster? Or have you not also begun things with great enthusiasm in your life, and then, at one time, you lost all drive? Where there not also times, perhaps they still exist, when you, despite good prospects at first, became frustrated and now ask, why have I actually put in all that effort? For what have I really worked so hard all these years? Was it worth all the trouble?

If you are familiar with such experiences, then you know right away, how the prophet Isaiah feels, or more precisely, the successor or the original Isaiah, the "second", or "Deuteroisaiiah", from whom this text originates. He is frustrated, discontent, disappointed, disillusioned. After long years there is finally a change in government in Babylon, where the Israelites are in exile, and finally it seems possible that this segment of the people can return to their rightful homeland, and then the people do not react with enthusiasm saying: "How wonderful that we can still experience this! Finally, we can return!" – No, they hesitate. They have, in the meantime, become well established on the Euphrates. They have no great desire to go back to Israel. And those, who are prepared to go back want to take their polytheism faith along. One was, after all, acclimatized to the customs of the land also as far as religion was concerned. And so Isaiah is dealing with quite a varied crowd of Ex-Israelites, some who want to go back, others, however, don't, and some of those who wish to go back, want to take their new faith with them. One could despair.

*4) But I said I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God.*

What have I and the priests who were also abducted to Babylon, done throughout those years? We have talked our heads off, merely that our people would not give up faith and hope. We have

prophesied almost 50 years to the people that there would be a return one day, that they must be patient and have trust, that God will turn the page, and now as that time has come, they say: "Well, no, it is really quite nice here, too, you just go back, I will stay here!" What have I actually worked for? Why have I and others exerted such great effort?

None of us is surprised that there are stretches of hard times in our life as Isaiah had experienced them, too. We all know them. We know exactly how one feels, when others don't pull in the same direction and when it seems, all our efforts had been in vain. But how are we dealing with such experiences?

In my experience as Pastor I do not very often hear people say full of conviction: I went through a difficult phase in my life, but it was good that it happened. As Amanda, who visited here last week, has actually said: Without question, in regards to my health, I went through hell, but exactly that has made it clear to my how blest I am that I have people who have supported me. That has given me strength that I knew, there are people believing in me, there are people who help me whom I do not even know, at the exact moment, when I needed this most.

Most people hold fast to the sorrow or the disappointment which has brought disorder to their life, not like Amanda, nor like Isaiah. It is strange that we humans are fixated on our sorrow, that it is so difficult for us to simply go forward and at a time leave this completely behind us.

But this is exactly what Isaiah does here.

First he says: I was truly disappointed and cast down, even though I knew that I was in the right... In brackets: Sometimes this makes things even harder when one truly knows that one is right and still experiences disappointment.

But Isaiah does not stop at his frustration: *5)And now the LORD says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength.*

Isaiah's disappointment is framed into our sermon text. First from the memory of his calling, which Isaiah experienced at a time when he was still unable to have any premonition of it, for he was still an embryo; and the acknowledgement of his mission from God, when he was told once again: This was not in vain, on the contrary, you will do this and achieve exactly that, for which I have intended you. Both are expressions of love, which God also brings to us. God has plans for us. We experience things in our life, perhaps even terrible things, and the question is, does this invalidate God's love and the purpose of our life?

I am certain that you heard of the attack on the Amish school in Pennsylvania, where an armed man executed five girls. A dreadful deed. I am also certain that you heard that the offender hated God, because he could not deal with the death of his just two week-old daughter some years ago. You have also heard how the Amish people have reacted. They have said, we do not understand this, but it is something that God has sent us, as dreadful as it is. They can forgive and seek support in their faith.

I know that we do not hate God, but I also know that we do not simply accept what we encounter in life. We stand somewhere between these two ways of thinking, which are inherent in this terrible example.

But what becomes clear to me when I read something like that in the paper is, that it can mean the difference between life and death, when I am fully occupied with quarreling with my fate. Hopefully, it will never happen that we intend to destroy others' life, but we can also destroy ourselves, if we never get beyond the question, why does this happen to me.

Today, we celebrate Thanksgiving once again. And the purpose of this feast is that we pause in our everyday life and give thanks to God. I myself have experienced that thanking God only then reaches its goal, if we can even thank God, when things do not go well. An honest prayer of thanks is not saying: "Thank you, God, that everything is one hundred percent in my life, that I am completely healthy, that my fridge and bank account are full, and that there is absolutely nothing that could worry me." – Let's be honest, when would we be in a position to say such a prayer? Probably never, for there is always something in our life that is not as we would like it to be, right?

A prayer of thanks should be: "God, even though my life is sinking into chaos right now, I thank you for holding fast to me and never giving up on me. I thank you for the small happiness which is often hidden beneath the ruins of my life, but nevertheless, it is there. I thank you that you have made me a special person, not because of what I can do and what I slave away for, but because you love me and I am your child.

What gives us hope? – From Isaiah we learn that memories and trust play an important role. What helps me when I am down are certain memories. Sometimes I take quite consciously certain parts of memory into my hand, to make it clear to myself that things have been different before than they are now. From Isaiah we learn that momentary mishaps do not mean general mishaps. It can take a long time until something changes. And many changes we are awaiting can be brought about by altering our attitude. Sentences like: "This will never change", or "I have given up hope", should be deleted from our vocabulary.

Though I do not know the way, you know it well, is a line in a German hymn. We live in faith of the hope, which is always connected to God's love. Life is and will always be a roller coaster. It is exactly this love which holds us, even when things go downhill at times. Amen.

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