

Sermon on James 2, 1-13, 15.10.2006

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)My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. 2)For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3)and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "Have a seat here, please," while you say to the poor man, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," 4)have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5)Listen my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him? 6)But you have dishonoured the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court? 7)Is it not they who blaspheme that honourable name by which you are called? 8)If you really fulfil the royal law, according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," you do well. 9)But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10)For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. 11)For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," said also, "Do not kill." If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12)So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. 13)For judgement is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgement.

Dear Congregation,

It may perhaps surprise you that this text does not actually talk about wealth and poverty, but about love of the neighbour. Yet, it talks so clearly here of the arrogance of the rich and of God's choosing the poor in this world. What we must recognize, in my opinion however, is that the problem of poverty is the consequence when there is a lack of neighbourly love within the congregation, and when there is a lack of love in the world.

And I want to develop this idea in the following way:

I believe that we all know that there is no deficiency of money and wealth in this world. "Stop, stop!" some of you will think. "What about my bank account? What about the poor in this city or in this country, not to mention the poor in this world, in Africa, Asia, in South America." – Just a moment, I will come to this later.

In actual fact, there is enough money, enough wealth, enough food in this world, there are enough resources to provide people with the necessities. There are no transportation problems to ship food into hunger regions, there are absolutely no doubts among experts that this planet can support all people.

You will also agree with me, when I say that this is not a problem of lack of wealth, but the lack of distribution of wealth. The north and west has a multiple of financial power compared to the south. Also worldwide there are people who have, and those, who have not.

I also want to say clearly that wealth is neither good nor bad. Money is not at fault when it accumulates somewhere. It is also not the case that all rich people are crooks who have acquired their money dishonestly. I know many rich people who have to work harder than others for their money and because of their money. On the other side, I also want to add immediately quite clearly, that poverty, also in Canada, has almost nothing to do with the fact that someone does not want the work and is therefore poor. There are very many people who are poor through no fault of their own. There are either unequal conditions at the start, which keep people in poverty, because their education is not recognized or their work experience is not accepted, which can never be Canadian experience for immigrants. There are more working poor in Canada than poor people who do not work. There are more women who are forced into a spiral of poverty through divorce or domestic violence, than women who can be blamed for their poverty because of unacceptable life styles, be that because of addiction to gambling in one of those destructive and totally unchristian casinos, which produce greed in a wealthy country

and make more people poor than rich, be that because of alcohol or drug addiction, which, by the way, are, in most cases, caused by the personal life history of people.

And if you consider this problem on an international level, most countries do not manage to free themselves from poverty, because, for instance, the western world mines the resources in Africa, processes them elsewhere and forces the poor countries to buy expensive, finished products from them. Furthermore, organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank create unreasonable restrictions in view of economical and social development of countries and the repayment of credits, so that the countries are kept in dependence and will never have a chance to free themselves from poverty.

The consequences are political unrest or wars, which are fought because of natural resources. Then one has to ask oneself, why western countries seal off their borders so that economic refugees from Africa or South America cannot cross certain borders.

If you now think that I hold a political speech, you are very wrong. I speak biblically, as one can make clear with this text or other statements of the Bible, when it is about the way how Christians should manage caring for others. I must forego examples from the sermon on the mount, the gospel of Luke, the Book Leviticus and the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos, so that I at least do justice to our sermon text. Whoever is interested in talking about that, can ask me about it.

Once again, I come back to the text. You see, it is not clear whether the example which James chooses is real or hypothetical. I think that it describes a phenomenon which is also not unfamiliar to us, namely, that we like to judge people according to what they represent outwardly, and, as a rule, think negatively about those who do not match our ideal.

2)For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3)and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "Have a seat here, please," while you say to the poor man, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," 4)have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

One should examine oneself in view of this text. It probably originated in a sermon which had the intent to fight against prejudices. The example revolves around the old problem, that it is easier to form one's own picture, based on certain observations, rather than getting to the bottom of things and to ask, why, indeed, does someone wear dirty clothing, has no money and comes as a petitioner also here to our congregation.

Is it right that we make distinctions? The answer according to Christian faith is no! It is not just that we make distinctions, because God – thanks to God – does not make them either. Imagine, if the sign of a good Christian would be that he has a full head of hair, or blood pressure of 130 over 80, we would find that totally absurd. For me, this would also mean, that I need no longer come here, because I do not meet either criteria – without saying here that I consider myself a good Christian.

1)My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

And there is a principle of Christian ethics, which says:

"You shall love your neighbour as yourself," you do well. 9)But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

With this, we are back at the starting point: A social problem, namely, that poor people could be treated badly in a Christian congregation, the problem of giving preference to the rich over the poor, is in the end a problem of faith, because the lack of neighbourly love and the discrimination of people rests only on their possessions.

This comes to a head in the last verse of this text:

12)So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. 13)For judgement is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgement.

The ten commandments and the commandment of neighbourly love are not laws which shall condemn us, but they are rules, set up by God for people living together, for which we have been liberated through Christ. The point is not that we have been exposed as sinners through these commandments – that we are, in any case, and no obeying of the commandments can free us from sin, only Christ's death on the cross has the power, to wipe out our sin – however, the commandments are supports for us as to how we can lead our life through faith in God. "You shall" is not a restriction, but a guideline. I hope that there will be a time when we understand this fully.

The second point is, if these commandments are meant to teach us how to live in faith, there is a danger that we bypass God's will, when we do not observe them.

There is the danger that God turns his back on us, is said here, if we do not treat people with mercy.

Two things should be said concerning this:

- a) Mercy is forgiving even though one is right, and it is
- b) helping others, no matter whether they have a claim on help or not.

Our world is not suffering from poverty, it is the lack of willingness to eliminate this poverty, because those who could do it, set up new rules time and again and have expectations and make demands which ultimately lead nowhere.

Dear Congregations, the reason why Martin Luther did not like this letter was because he was of the opinion, that it immediately dictates to the people, just liberated to faith, again new rules and instructions on how one should behave as a Christian. There is certainly the danger that texts as this one here, are used by a preacher for trying to open not only the hearts of people but foremost their wallets.

My hope is that you understand that, if we define ourselves as believers or as Christians, we must understand that God needs our willingness to jump over our own shadow and through faith are motivated to treat others with mercy. This does not have to be about money only. It can mean that we are able to forgive others. It may be that we have resources which we can use for others who need them. It can be time, love, caring, showing interest in the life situation; for a congregation this can mean that we take on charitable work; it can be that we employ ourselves for the rights and matters of the poor and disadvantaged, and in this way remain as Christians the "light of the world" and the "salt of the world".

However, there is one thing it cannot mean – and this I say as a servant of Jesus Christ also very clearly – that we take care only of our own advantages, judge others whom we do not know, and that we sit on our wealth and do not care about others.

This text, which combines and brings to the point much of what the Bible says apart from this, does not allow one thing: that we hear it and do nothing.

Amen.

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