

## Sermon on Isaiah, 65, 17-25, 26.11.2006

*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:**

*17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. 19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. 20 No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. 21 They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. 23 They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord and their descendants as well. 24 Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. 25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.*

Dear Congregation,

Can you imagine? Finally the Israelites come back home out of exile in Babylon, as God promised. After 58 years in a foreign land they come back to the place of their childhood. Some had died in the meantime, and the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed during the war, but still: Shouldn't they be more thankful? Shouldn't this experience, which is actually an experience of faith, have made them think and a little more grateful?

Very quickly they are back to a routine which originally had lead to their displacement. The people do not care about God and his commandments. The situation is chaotic and they worship other gods. The prophet says: Now God has to personally intervene and needs to change everything and make everything new.

This sounds a little desperate and all in all this is a very matter-of-fact statement. I do not know about you, but I really feel sorry for God that he himself has to make it happen that his people are a delight for him and that he can be pleased with them.

But that is how we are. As soon as we have achieved what we had hoped for, we come up with new expectations. And as soon as a painful experience and suffering has turned out to be over we tend to be forgetful.

During this month I had to think of an event which happened on November 9, 1989. That was the day when the wall which had divided East and West-Germany for 40 years fell. If you know a little bit about the background of the movement of the resistance against the communist regime in the east and if you know, that those demonstrations which led to the fall of the GDR were instigated and led by Christians, whose only weapon against the power of their state had been their wit and their faith. If you then had experienced the joy of all people as the inconceivable happened, something no one had really expected to happen anymore, namely that a divided nation would be unified again, than you can imagine that many people were overwhelmed and also thankful to God. Before this change occurred the churches even in the communist east where only a small percentage of people in fear of the state had been Christians had been filled with people. After the change in west and east people were so grateful and attend church services. But this only lasted for a short period of time. If you on a Sunday morning would attend any church service in any given church in East or West you will had the feeling that you had stumbled into a private gathering because of the only twenty people which might show up. The churches are empty again.

Thankfulness is a short lived experience which somehow evaporates very quickly. But thankfulness on the other hand should be a part of our daily routine and should be part of every single prayer we utter. In the

Book of Psalms there is no psalm no matter how bad the circumstances for the person who prays which does not include words of thanks and praise to almighty God.

Now the question for us this morning is: How do we reach this point where we no matter what our circumstances are can do the same and thank and praise God?

I know that I ask this question on Christ the King Sunday, which in the German tradition is also called 'Eternity Sunday' and on which we commemorate all the losses of loved ones and in the realm of our families we faced and remember the dead at the end of this service. Some may ask how on earth we can be thankful at all in the face of grief and death. I am going to tell you how.

The answer as always lies within our text which is from the last book of Isaiah, the third prophet which has contributed to this book and in which the prophet tries to tell his people that they should turn back to God not in order to make him come, but because he comes anyway. What does that mean? The people who had returned from exile should understand that God is near, that God will return, that God not again will punish his people, but in all his mercy would bring about a situation in which all disbelief, all injustice and strife will be abolished.

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Dear congregation, the only difference between those people at the times of the prophet and us is, that we believe that those promises God has given are fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. In him the kingdom of God has drawn near. Through Jesus we can know that God is merciful and is seeking and waiting for us every single moment of our life – different to the belief of the Israelites to whom God was somehow distant, foreign and inapproachable, so distant that only once a year the high priest entered the inner most holy, the room in the temple where they believed God resided, to bring forward prayers of intercession on behalf of his people. We call this God our "Father" and we know through the preaching of Christ that he knows every single word, every petition before we even pray them. We still wait for the peace and the breakthrough of his kingdom, when Christ comes back one day and God will wipe away all our tears and will put an end to all our suffering, as he has promised us. Until then two things still will apply: We will continue to shed tears and will experience pain and suffering, but already we can know that God is present and live out of his mercy.

How does this affect our level of thankfulness? This depends on you, dear congregation, every single one of us. This depends on the fact whether we only see our pain, or if we also have eyes and ears for God's love, which he gives to us through Christ every single day, regardless what we just go through. Like faithfulness and trust in God what we have to train especially when things do not go the way we wanted, thankfulness is also something we need to practice. Let me explain this using an example:

A Scottish athlete in the 19th century made an iron discus based on a description he read in a book. What he didn't know was that the discus used in official competition was made of wood with only an outer rim of iron. His was solid metal and weighed three or four times as much as those being used by other discus throwers. - According to author John Eldredge, the man marked out the record distance in a field near his

home and trained day and night to match it. For years he labored until he could break the record. Then he took his iron discus to England for his first competition. When he arrived at the games, he was handed the official discus. He easily set a new record, a distance far beyond those of his competitors. He remained the uncontested champion for many years. This man trained under a heavy burden and became better for it.

When we are given a heavy burden to bear, we need to learn to bear it in Jesus' strength and for His sake. Whatever the burden or suffering, God will use it to "perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle" us, as 1 Peter 5:10 says.

Our burdens can make us better than we ever imagined—stronger, more patient, more courageous, gentler, and more loving than we could otherwise be.

With faith which we have trained under burdens we get further. Thankfulness practiced under difficult circumstances helps us to step into the light of God out of the darkness of our life.

Who benefits from our thankfulness, we or God? No question God rejoices if we do not forget about him and remain thankful unto him. I often imagine God as not being much different from every other parent who like to be thanked by their children without having alluded them to do so. Don't you feel proud and extremely gratified when they experience the honest love of their children?

I think of God as a person rather than an entity and I think I make him happy when I am thankful. *19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people.*

The other thing I get out of this text is, that Thankfulness can be the one finger with which we hang onto a cliff and which hinders that we slip off the cliff and fall even further. Thankfulness is a good thing because it lets us see something else than only the abyss below us. And it can also give us the strength to get back on safe terrain.

Dear congregation, in the beginning I have asked the question how we manage to praise God and be thankful towards him even in difficult times. One answer is that we start training with burdens on our shoulder so that we do not give up this attitude of thankfulness when the going gets tough.

The second answer is, that we have to be careful that if life is not as easy as we would like it to be do the opposite of praising God, namely accusing him, that things are so unbearable; this is something we are very good at. It is not only that trouble, grief and suffering test our trust and faith in God. We often also take on the attitude to hold God accountable for the bad things which are going on in our life and in this world. God, why do you do this to me, and why do you let this happen? Does that sound familiar? – Do we really know why we experience hardships? Are we able to judge, for which reason bad things happen to us? Are we able to peak behind the curtain and take God's perspective to be right when we say: This makes no sense even from God's point of view? – We have to be careful, friends, because we have no ultimate insight in God's plans, we can neither see as far as he can, nor do we see the whole picture as he can.

I have no clue whether everything I experience in my life will make sense or not. But that I think like this speaks volume about the fact, that I am not God. How do I know? Someone said that our life is like a book, of which the last chapter will be opened by God when one day we will stand right in front of him. How many books especially crime stories have I read where only the last chapter has connected all the dots and given a clear solution of all the questions I had? Before we have not read the last chapter of our life, should we be more careful how we explain the questions posed by our circumstances so far.

Dear congregation, thankfulness does not grow on trees, so that we only have to pick it. It is a product of faith, which trusts God and believes that he is near and takes interest in us and brings everything to a good ending. Shouldn't I be thankful to him? Amen

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