

**Sermon on January 18<sup>th</sup> 2004, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany  
11.30 a.m. Annex Petri church**

Superintendent Michael Klatt

Text: Romans 12, 4 – 16

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Perhaps you partly remember some sentences of today's reading of the epistle which was taken from Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, saying:

*Let love for our brotherhood breed warmth... With unflagging energy, in ardour of spirit, serve the Lord... Contribute to the needs of God's people, and practise hospitality... and so forth.*

A whole catalogue of reprimands and orders is pouring down on us. Is it true that all this has to be fulfilled? Is Paul as naive as to think that his congregation in Rome will fulfill everything he writes to them? Or were the Christians in Rome the epitome of a congregation? What is the meaning behind all this?

Well, as far as we are concerned, we know that we normally react allergically to being reprimanded or ordered to do something.

For a better understanding of what Paul means, it is important to have a brief look at what Paul says at the beginning of our passage. Here he mentions the human body with its many limbs and organs and compares this with Christ and his congregation and the members of his congregation. The various parts of a

human body have completely different functions and tasks but they all belong to the one body. In the same way there are completely different functions and tasks, gifts and abilities in a congregation, without these abilities in themselves being of higher or lower value. The only thing that counts is that they all refer to Christ and that they serve him. As a matter of fact: Without him they would be like chaff in the wind, in the same way as the limbs would be loose and useless without the body. One could write a whole sermon on this profound comparison and think about what this actually means for the life of a congregation. But this would be too much for this sermon.

I would rather draw your attention to something else. In contrast to the time when Paul lived, it nowadays does not go without saying that somebody who believes in God feels part and parcel of the body of Christ or that he regards the fellowship of Christians in a congregation as being important. On our visits to people in our congregations we often hear: "I can assure you that I believe in God, but I don't need the church for my belief. Praying and reading the Bible are things I can do at home."

Well, the church has to be self-critical at this point. Over centuries, the protestant belief in particular, with its emphasis on justification through belief alone, has considerably contributed to this widespread attitude. God with his love means me very personally. What do I need the fellowship of other Christians for

when seeking salvation? By the way, our church hymn book is a mirror of this attitude. The hymns in it reflect much more the situation of the individual person than of the congregation as a whole.

Concerning this individual belief I would like to tell you a little story. Due to several mishaps a farmer had become embittered. He railed against his fate and refused to go to church any more. One day his pastor payed him a visit. Without saying a word the farmer asked him in. Without saying anything they both sat down at the fireside. After a while the pastor without saying anything took the tongs and picked a little piece of wood out of the fire. He put it on the stone in front of the fireside. After glowing and smouldering for a while it went out. Without saying anything the two of them continued to sit for a while. Finally the farmer pulled himself together und stretched his hand out to the pastor. "I have understood your sermon", he said. "I will come back..."

According to the witness of the whole Bible God does not want dispersed souls but a congregation. Here every individual is carried by others and contributes to the carrying of others. No one owns his faith like his property, everyone can get caught in doubts and ponderings, in agony and tribulations.

Furthermore something else should be mentioned: Jesus' instruction to us to proclaim God's message in our world and to

refer it to topical issues of our time can much more easily be fulfilled by the church as a whole than by an individual person. Two points are absolutely clear to Paul. First: Being a Christian means you can only exist in a fellowship with others. This is also comforting since not everybody has to fulfil everything. And secondly: Being a Christian means you can only exist in close association with Christ. Without him all our doings would be in vain. Moreover, Paul's strong emphasis on the importance of loving each other is based on his belief that loving each other is first and foremost nurtured and nourished by the love of Christ. - A little story which many of you will know tells about this love of Christ. Towards the end of his life somebody dreams of his life as being a long walk on a beach together with Jesus. Two sets of footprints can be seen in the sand, one belonging to himself, the other to Jesus. To his surprise and anger, however, he notices that sometimes there is only one set of footprints to be seen. This was in times when his life had been in trouble and darkness. Had Jesus forsaken him in those times? "My friend", Jesus answered, "I would never leave you alone. Those times when you felt left alone and in which you can see only one set of footprints, were times when I carried you."

Hearing this story we understand that the love of Christ carries us through our lives. It is always there for us. He gives his love to us without being asked. His love does not have to be earned. It is the

foundation of our life even in times of need and agony. Thus, being sheltered in his love, we can withstand the hardships of life. Thus we are able to turn and at the same time are asked to turn to others in love, something which is of special importance to Paul in our text: We are to turn to our brothers and sisters in love. What would love be, if it stayed by itself? Just imagine God had been egocentric and had stayed by himself with his love, had not come out of his shell, so to speak, and had not become flesh in Christ. How much more wanting in love our world would be, how much less hope there would be!

But what does this love amongst Christians who know that they are loved by Christ actually look like?

Again I would like to make this clear with a story – as you will have noticed by now it's story telling time with me today.

Once upon a time there was a renowned man who had fallen out of favour with his king. Therefore the king had him imprisoned on the highest floor of a tower. One night it was full moon. The man was standing on the roof terrace and was looking down. There he discovered his wife standing at the foot of the tower. She was giving signals and touching the wall of the tower. Full of excitement the man looked down, but he couldn't make head nor tail of what was going on. So he waited to see what was going to happen.

At the foot of the tower his wife had found a beetle which was fond of honey. She spread some honey over the beetle's feelers and set it head upwards on the wall. Slowly the beetle started to crawl upwards always getting its bearings from the scent of the honey. Finally it reached the prisoner. When he saw the little animal he gently took it in his hand and discovered that a thread of silk had been fastened to it. Carefully he loosened the thread and slowly pulled it upwards. When it became heavier at the end the man discovered that a string had been fastened to the thread. And when he pulled it up there was a cord tied to it and finally a strong rope. He quickly tied the rope round the iron bars of the tower and lowered himself down into freedom.

Most unlikely? Who knows? But that's not the point of the story. The point is that through the story we come to understand better what love is about. Love, like this woman's love, is inventive and creative, sometimes even crazy, as everyone knows who has ever fallen head over heels in love. Love often does not walk along trodden paths. It dares the unbelievable. It does that which nobody had thought possible. Love is not sluggish but unflagging, as Paul writes. It even dares the paradoxical. It can, for example, happen that somebody blesses those who persecute him. Christ himself did so. Whoever follows him in this, that is: bless those who persecute him, will preserve in his mind that in spite of the abyss of earthly enmity, there is solidarity among all God's creatures.

And he will protect his own heart from being taken over by overwhelming hate.

Furthermore, love practises hospitality as we experienced in such a wonderful manner during EXPO 2000 and will practise it again during the Kirchentag in Hannover next year by opening our hearts and doors to visitors. Love is joyful with the joyful and mourns with the mourners. This means that love makes a real effort to turn to the other and listen to him. Love does not say: “Get lost”, it does not deaden but remains alert and devoted to the other without stifling him. Last but not least love remains joyful in hope, in trouble it stands firm and it persists in prayer. Why is love like this? Because it knows that it is carried by an even bigger love that is the love of Christ. I can hold on to this love like onto a rope, especially in times of distress, and, paradoxically, tied to this love I gain freedom. I become free of always having to look after myself and free to turn to others and support them.

This is another aspect which we understand on hearing the story. Such love does not confine itself to talking – the prisoner’s wife wouldn’t have got far with talking – instead it demands deeds. In our German hymnbook there is a modern hymn the first verse of which says: Love is not just a word, love that’s words and deeds. In other words: Both the love towards God and the love towards man as well the service on Sundays and the service on weekdays belong inextricably together. They have, however, to be

distinguished but must not be separated. Spirituality and daily work are interwoven with the aim that belief turns into deed and proves itself in the midst of all demands of our world, of our families and professions and also in politics, in its commitment to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.

Often this commitment is too much for an individual person, normally it is too much for an individual congregation also. That's why our view is widened to the church as a whole even beyond the borders of our country. The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the congregation in Rome which was beyond the borders of Israel and even right in the centre of the political powers of that time. By this Paul's intention was to emphasise that the power of the love of God claims to be universal and wants to include all areas of life and of this world. God's love, however, always starts on a small scale with every one of us and with every single congregation. But whatever is lived and done here on a small scale will radiate.

Wherever someone cares for somebody else in need, wherever someone mourns with the mourners and is joyful with the joyful, wherever someone practises hospitality knowing at the same time that he himself is strengthened and carried by the love of the one whose body he belongs to, wherever all this happens darkness will be lightened and the cold breath of violence, of loneliness and exclusion has to give way to the warmth of solidarity and of loving each other.



May God in this way shine upon us strongly and abundantly with his love that has appeared in Jesus Christ, and may he thus strengthen us on all our ways throughout this year.

And the peace and love of God which surpasses all understanding abide with us and keep us in Jesus Christ, our Lord who is the light of the world, Amen.