

OLKR Jörg Homann: Devotion - Luk. 17, 11 - 19

Grace be with you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I rejoice with all my heart and I feel very privileged to celebrate this service with you. Isn't it a great gift of the Lord of our Church that the Gospel unites us all beyond all worldly barriers.

It really is astonishing and it is something for which one can only be thankful.

It is part of my ministry to visit partner churches in the name of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hanover in Germany and I was privileged to meet so many different peoples in many countries.

For example: the mountain tribe called the Kojas in India,
the pygmies on the fringes of the rain forest of Central Africa,
the small holders in Brazil,
the Lutheran congregation in their prayer house in the Taiga of Siberia
and our brothers and sisters in Ethiopia.

And members of our partner church in Southern Africa.

In all these encounters it always touches me again: We are so different!

In our history, in our customs and traditions, in our culture and our view of life.

The backdrop of our experiences is totally different!

But then we celebrate a church service together. We pray together, we listen to the word of God and together we praise our Lord.

And together we celebrate that God accepted us in word and sacrament and together we respond positively to him in our faith.

And then we realise so clearly: We belong together.

It is our faith that knits us together very deeply.

Our faith is the foundation binding us together, the foundation on which we build our life structures.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, I wish to share with you a story of faith today, the story of the 10 lepers. I read a passage from Holy Scripture according to St. Luke, chapter 17, verses 11 - 19:

"Now on his way to Jerusalem Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

When he saw them he said: "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him - and he was a Samaritan.

Jesus asked: "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

Then he said to him: "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

This story is one of the most powerful in Holy Scripture.

Luther said about it: "This gospel text is a simple story which is easy to understand and which hardly needs any interpretation.

But at the same time, in spite of her simplicity, it presents an outstanding illustration of faith to us."

With this story Holy Scripture gives us an example of what real Christian faith means, because this whole narrative peaks in the words of Jesus to the Samaritan: "Your faith has made you well. Your faith saved you."

This faith is pictured as follows:

- It calls for health and prays.
- It is a faith of obedience.
- A faith that experiences miracles and praises God.
- A faith that gives itself up to Jesus and accepts him as the Lord.

I. Faith calls for help and prays

The text tells us (v. 12, 13): As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, master, have pity on us!"

Many people of today's Germany don't call to God for help.

In any case in our country people find it very difficult to pray.

What is the reason for this?

The bible invites us so cordially to pray.

For example in the first letter of Peter, chapter 5, verse 7: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

What a beautiful invitation to turn to God trustfully in prayer, just to cast all our anxieties on him.

Why does it then seem to be so difficult to pray?

Somebody once said: "The last thing we want to be taken away from us is our anxiety or our worries."

This sounds like a contradiction but it is true at the same time!

For our troubles are a signal that we would like to be our own masters.

We want to help ourselves, we want to determine ourselves.

Therefore we find it so difficult to throw all our troubles into the hands of God.

You see our problem is that "old Adam" and "old Eve" within us want to dictate to us and therefore we find it difficult to pray.

The lepers in our story pray.

They entrust all their misery to our Lord with the words:

"Jesus, dear master, have mercy upon us. Kyrie eleison."

And the very first Christian congregations already took up this prayer in their order of service.

"Kyrie eleison. Lord have mercy."

And you know, we can put everything that burdens us into these words.

All our sufferings and hardships of day-to-day life within the family, at our working place, even in our church.

"Lord, Jesus, our master, have mercy upon us."

Of course a living faith does not only pray in the church service or in a situation of distress. On the contrary living faith expresses itself every day in prayer to the Lord. And thus our Lord gives us the strength we need for every day.

It is a diabolic temptation which makes so many things seem to be more important in our daily life.

We have so many duties, many appointments, many burdens - even in our church offices and in our ministry of church leadership.

Then it may so easily happen that we neglect our personal prayer.

But then our faith will soon be burnt out. We become totally empty.

We need prayer, the prayer for ourselves and the prayer in the community of believers.

Prayer: That means our soul is breathing.

So we learn from those lepers: to have faith means to pray.

Whoever prays surrenders himself with all his petitions into the hand of God and entrusts himself into his loving care. Whatever may happen!

Jesus did the same in the garden of Gethsemane when he prayed:

"My father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours, be done."

Faith which prays puts no demands.

Faith which prays is aware of the following fact: Whatever may happen, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

This is the very point which distinguishes the Christian faith from other religions.

In Tranquebar in India there is a magnificent Hindu temple at the seaside.

When I first paid a visit to this temple the statue which is found in this temple was beautifully decorated.

My companion told me: "Somebody thanked the deity for help he had received."

A few days later we again looked into the same temple.

The statue was bare and all the decoration was gone.

My companion explained to me: "Somebody wants to punish the deity because she did not help him."

The praying faith that turns to Christ is totally different.

The praying faith does not demand but knows: Whatever happens, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The praying faith pleads for help and at the same time throws itself into the loving hands of God.

II. Faith is obedient

Our text says (v. 14): "When he saw them, he said: Go, show yourself to the priest! And as they went, they were cleansed."

When the lepers started their journey, they were ill.

They were stricken with leprosy and had to present themselves to the priests.

What they did was actually quite stupid, for the verdict of the priests seemed to be obvious: "You are still unclean with leprosy."

But still they went filled with a trusting, obedient faith because Jesus had sent them.

Wasn't it the same with Abraham when he left his country because God told him to do so.

Or we may remember Peter who put out his nets although he had struggled the whole night and his experience in his profession as a fisherman told him it was nonsense to go out once more in the morning. But his reaction was:

"Yes, Lord, even if I don't understand it, even if this is against all common sense and against all knowledge of my trade, I will do it because of your word and of your command."

This is obedience of faith.

Now I ask myself: Which are the particular challenges of obedience of faith for the Lutheran church universally?

Most of all, according to my own observations, we lack missionary zeal.

We tend to focus too much on existing congregations.

We tend to concern ourselves only with people who already belong to our church and I do feel that this is in contradiction with the command of our Lord, who said: "Go into the whole world!"

Doesn't this mean: Go beyond the confined boundaries of your congregation?

We have to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in word and deed also beyond the barriers of our local parish.

But, alas, so often, we do this only half-heartedly because we believe that our experience is a different one.

Our so-called experience tells us:

People outside our congregation have so many other things on their minds and we have tried evangelisation so often in vain and in any case we have so much to do that we rather focus on our small traditional flock.

So it seems that our own experiences contradict any missionary engagement.

But - and this is a very great BUT - the demand of our Lord is real and obedience in faith also means obedience against our so-called normal experiences as was the case with those lepers: They simply marched on against all human experience just because Jesus told them to do so! So faith is obedient and

III. Faith experiences miracles and praises God

"But one of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice."
(v. 15)

"When he saw that he was **healed**"

Beyond any shadow of doubt, this was a miracle.

In our country this question of miracles is discussed very often.

I personally believe that a dispute whether such miracles are real or not, is totally irrelevant because the essence of a miracle is not that something supernatural happens.

In our story the Samaritan discovers the real meaning of a miracle. It suddenly dawns on him: This healing comes from God. God himself intervened in my life.

This is the actual miracle: God intervenes in our lives.

I believe that all of us have experienced such miraculous interventions in our lives.

Each and everyone of us here present could tell stories, how God took action in his or her life, how God's guidance simply was present and strengthened our faith.

I mean it already is a miracle when we can forgive each other and start a new page in dealing with one another.

It also is a miracle of God when we experience how we are carried through in difficult times.

I believe that it is all important that we discover the wonderful actions of God in our life by looking at matters with eyes of faith.

This is exactly what we learn from that Samaritan.

It says "When he **saw** that he was healed, he praised God. ..."

The emphasis is lying on SAW! Through faith his eyes were opened to recognise the miraculous action of God. This is so important.

Only then we are capable to experience miracles by seeing with the eyes of faith.

And the result of this is: Gratitude.

That also was the spontaneous reaction of that Samaritan. We are told that he **praised** God with a loud voice.

It is part and parcel of our discipleship in this world to witness God's gracious actions unequivocally.

Our church, our world, with all their problems, so dearly need this thankful praising of God.

So often we only see our problems and we forget all about praising the Lord!

But to praise God is also important for ourselves because out of this praising the power of serving grows.

Not the fearful worries give us power for our service as Christians but the praising of our Lord.

It is out of our praising of God that imagination and love to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed grow.

So we summarise: Faith which discovers the miracles of God praises the Lord.

And when we praise the Lord the world around us starts to shine!

So faith praises God and

IV. Faith surrenders to Jesus and accepts him as Lord!

"He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him." (v. 16)

When someone threw himself to somebody's feet in the time of Jesus, this was very significant.

It meant: I admit that you are my Lord. I belong to you.

So the Samaritan, by throwing himself down in front of Jesus' feet, acknowledges and witnesses: You are my Lord and you are my God!

Here we can say: Faith has reached its final destination.

The original miracle of physical healing doesn't draw the attention any more.

It goes far beyond that. The Lord of life receives praise.

The Samaritan discovers that in Jesus Christ God accepted him and spoke to him and therefore his reply to this miracle is: Yes Jesus, you are my Lord.

With this witness the Samaritan found the foundation on which he could build his own life. Nobody can build the structure of his life without having a solid foundation to build on.

So we are told that we cannot live and that we cannot shape our world without a solid foundation.

The significant challenges of our time - justice, peace and conservation of creation - cannot be solved by conventional methods.

Pragmatism and calculated self-interests no longer are sufficient to solve these challenges.

What we need are the willingness to be responsible and to love.

In other words: We need a strong foundation in faith.

And only in our faith in Jesus we can find this foundation.

Exactly this is what the Samaritan realised.

Therefore he threw himself at Jesus' feet and gave himself up to him.

He recognised beyond doubt:

"Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we shall be saved."

And then Jesus told the Samaritan (v. 19): "Get up and go; your faith has made you well."

A more precise translation would say: Your faith has "saved" you.

"To be saved" means: the love of God has embraced you for time and eternity.

Jesus is with you in life and in death.

If you cling to him he will hold on to you.

He will hold you in health and in sickness, in life, in death and in eternity.

To illustrate this I wish to share with you a very personal experience of faith:

My wife and I had to part from a dear, close relative.

He was in his mid-forties and he was a brilliant academic on the height of his career.

And then he was struck down by deadly cancer.

It was on a Sunday morning.

Michael was lying in the living room, bearing the mark of death.

Together we celebrated holy communion.

When Michael had received bread and wine, I presented to him a little cross.

It was a cross carved from the wood of an olive tree from the holy land.

The figure of Jesus Christ was attached to this cross with his outspread arms.
Michael took this cross into his hand and observed it intensively.
He held it firmly, he clung to it, he clung to this Jesus, hanging on the cross in his suffering.
And he still held this crucifix in his hands, even in his coffin.

At his funeral we again celebrated holy communion. We formed a big circle around the altar and we received bread and wine in the hope of receiving God's eternal kingdom.
And in the middle of this circle was the coffin of Michael and in front of the coffin a candle stick with an Easter candle.
In the face of death and in the midst of the celebrating congregation the light of resurrection was burning.
It was burning in our hearts and it surely also penetrated into Michael's coffin.
This is how our faith carries us through time and eternity.

This is the faith which totally accepts Jesus and utters at the same time: You are my Lord and you are my God.
This faith does not only experience healing.
This faith receives salvation.

Dear Sisters and Brothers, in this faith we will remain together in communion with each other across all boundaries of this world in time and in eternity.

Isn't this a great gift that we have received?
Amen.