

Sermon on Hebrews 12, 1 – 3, Hanover International Worship, Palm Sunday (March 16th, 2008)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ!

The text for today's sermon is taken from the letter to the Hebrews – quite a peculiar document in the N.T. There is an author hidden behind his – or her? – message. About is – or her – place we know nothing. The time is probably near the end of the 1st century A.D. The addressees? Well, at least their condition is mentioned, otherwise we had no idea where to put the letter historically. But the author's intention - supported by anonymity and lack of historical details – apparently is to address every reader wherever he or she might be living. Don't ask: Who? Where? When? To whom? It's about you, dear Hebrews.

The author uses a cultivated Greek. He - or she – is best acquainted with the O.T. and it's rabbinical interpretation. No other document in the N. T. contains more quotations from and allusions to the O. T.

Now, there is some information concerning the addressees.

- Parish members leave and even abandon their faith in God (3,12).
- We want you not to be lax (6,12)
- We should not stay away from our meetings as some do (10,25)
- You met the test of great suffering and held firm (10,32)
- Do not lose heart and grow faint (12,3)
- Take heed that there is no one among you who forfeits the grace of God (12, 15).

Heavy conflicts, strength and faith worn down. This requires comfort, encouragement. To me, this so called letter to the Hebrews is an icon of Jesus Christ – in writing.

Well, Palm Sunday's icon is Christ, riding into Jerusalem – Hey sanna, ho sanna, sanna sanna ho, do you remember? – on a donkey, the peaceful carrier of heavy burdens. So, as we know now, Jesus opens the climax of his conflict.

With this icon put before our eyes, we listen: Hebrews 12, 1 – 3.

Did the donkey rider know in which kind of mess he was getting? And furthermore by causing havoc in the temple?

Living is so often being caught in conflicts. But not everyone is able to master conflicts in a fruitful, meaningful way. Avoiding conflicts, however, can isolate, can cause physical and psychical illness. From experience we know: Often there is a fear to lose, to remain ashamed, and so people prefer to turn away from the conflict which always sends signals of danger. Very deep in all of us there is an irrational and mostly unconscious fear we would be deadly punished if we changed our mind in a conflict touching deeply rooted convictions. Changing one's skin leaves very vulnerable – at least for a certain time. But following my fears and anxieties is nothing else than refraining from life and so missing my target. By the way, "miss the target" is known to be an interpretation of the word "sin". Which shows that "sin" principally is not to be understood in a moral sense. The word "sin" describes my status of relations and their quality.

By riding into Jerusalem Jesus deliberately runs big risks, submits to the opposition of sinners, as our author puts it. But there we discover a first beam of light upon this rider: Trusting in God Jesus conquers anxiety, remains faithful to God and remains himself – in line with everything he said and did unto this moment. So, my beloved sisters and brothers, Hebrews, you need not to hide, not to fear, not to flee.

Even if you, dear Hebrews, are living in the 21st century in Europe's churches, losing members and money, sadly watching people leaving, alarmed by noticing a growing indifference towards the churches. Do not allow your anxieties to fascinate you.

Because there is a second beam of light upon the donkey rider who is going to endure the disgrace of the cross and to take his seat at the right hand of God the Father.

Jesus is called the pioneer and the perfecter of faith. And we, so it is written, have to run with resolution – or perseverance - the race which lies ahead of us.

In antiquity, the Olympic motto was: Having taken part is what matters. This concept of competition is in contradiction to the view frequently held – especially in the entertainment scene – that there can only be one winner and a lot of losers.

In the Bible and subsequently also in Christian literature Christian life has often been compared with a race, a sport competition. Here, in the letter to the Hebrews, this picture is elaborated in a surprisingly comforting way. The author describes something which we nowadays call a win – win – solution. Jesus is the first to reach the goal. But he does not triumph over those who follow him. Unthinkable! No, He is the pioneer and perfecter and thus the leader of a winning team. Those who follow looking upon him are attracted, pulled and driven forward through crisis and conflict lastly to win as he has won. There is no loser, no one following threatened by shame or disgrace – the winner took that all. Whoever is running behind Him, may run patiently and hopefully.

Here open paradoxicalities. The winner does not take all the price. He is the winner because he took all the shame, the disgrace of the cross which in antiquity was regarded as an utmost horror, hated and deeply despised by civil society. Paradoxically, the cross now is turned to become a sign of victory, of life, of healing and salvation. Don't make compromises, don't flee conflicts – look upon Him. Early Christian authors when reading Psalm 96, 10: "The Lord has become King" added: The Lord became King *from the wood*.

We notice that we are being presented a peculiar concept of Jesus Christ and his ministry. There are different titles indicating his dignity, his meaning. He is called pioneer and perfecter of faith. The term "Faith in Jesus" does not occur in this letter. Instead we are summoned to look at Him, to fix our eyes upon Him. We are summoned to believe as Jesus did – but nevertheless Jesus is not only an example of faith. It could prove very fruitful to study this letter to the Hebrews together with Jewish believers because the faith of Jesus is also described as a summit: Jesus is the last in a long succession of believers mentioned in the previous chapter, from Adam until the lots of righteous men and women to be persecuted and probably executed because of their faith in Maccabean times.

It is beyond doubt that the author of this letter attempts to present Jesus not only as the pioneer and perfecter of faith but also as the High Priest opening the holiest of holies – the very presence of God and full communion with God – and he / she does so in reaction upon the

demolition of the temple where now atoning sacrifices no longer can be offered. With Jesus, they are no longer necessary.

The Holy Week, then, is no longer a time of tristesse or low spirits. In one of the readings of the 2nd Sunday in Advent we hear: "When all this begins to happen (terrible and shaking signs, famine, drought, wars, earthquakes), stand upright and hold your heads high, because your liberation is near" (Luke 21, 28-32).

In a similar way we are comforted by the twofold call: Fix your eyes upon Jesus, considerate Him. The appropriate translation would be: Contemplate Him. Fix your eyes upon Him: do not lose your orientation. Contemplate Him: perceive Him thoroughly, predecessor, pioneer, perfecter, the winner who won taking all the shame and makes you win.

From this contemplation praise and thankfulness will arise. Out of praise and thankfulness there will be power and courage. And out of power and courage: courageous action.

Let us close with praise – with words which by tradition are attributed to St. Columba:

Christ is the world's redeemer, he lover of the pure,
The fount of heavenly wisdom, our trust and hope secure.
The armour of His soldiers, the Lord of earth and sky,
Our health while we are living, our life when we shall die.

Christ hath our host surrounded with clouds of martyrs bright,
Who wave their palms in triumph and fire us for the fight.
Christ the red cross ascended to save a world undone,
And suffering for the sinful, our full redemption won.

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