

## **Sermon on 20 July 2008 in Hanover-Kleefeld**

### **International Worship-Service Hanover**

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

Dear sisters and brothers

Today's text for the sermon is from chapter 4 of the First Epistle of Peter. I'm reading its verses 7 to 11 from the Good News Bible.

The end of all things is near. You must be self-controlled and alert, to be able to pray. Above everything, love one another earnestly, because love covers many sins. Open your homes to each other without complaining. Each one, as a good manager of God's different gifts, must use for the good of others the special gift he (or she) has received from God. Whoever preaches must preach God's messages; whoever serves must serve with the strength that God gives him, so that in all things praise may be given to God through Jesus Christ, to whom belong glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.

The end of all things is near. These very first words make it obvious that the text comes from a different time, or at least from a context that defined time differently to us today. The perception of life in the early Christian congregations was marked by the current world passing away and a new one being about to emerge.

The end of all things is near. The First Epistle of Peter was written in a time when Christians withdrew noticeably from certain areas of public life in the Roman Empire. All aspects of life in the ancient world were influenced by religion. There were numerous temples in the towns, such as for Zeus, Athena or Dionysus, religious festivals were regularly on the agenda and very popular.

Therefore, it attracted negative attention when people who followed Jesus kept away from religious festivities or declined invitations to sacrificial gatherings, e.g. to mark the occasion of a birthday. The retreat from society of this slowly growing new group and their differing way of life led to suspicion, ridicule and even hostility.

In these circumstances, the First Epistle of Peter seeks to console the congregations, to give them fresh courage and strength.

The apostle argues, 'what you are currently experiencing and suffering is difficult to bear but this time of hardship will soon have an end. For hope lives in us, and the immortal life in the communion with Christ in God's eternal kingdom is waiting for us.'

'Because of His great mercy,' it says in the first chapter of this epistle, 'He gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with living hope.'

This new life had come into reach for the congregations in Asia Minor; confidently and soberly they awaited, therefore, the end of all present things. This prospect, however, was not distressing or alarming to them. On the contrary, it enabled them to make good use of the remaining time by looking out for each other and being there for one another. One prospect, one attitude to life we, too, want to engage in this morning, in this service.

Above everything, love one another earnestly, because love covers many sins. Open your homes to each other without complaining. Each one – as a good manager of God's different gifts – must use for the good of others the special gift he or she has received from God.

This morning, I would like to tell you about three women whom I met last spring near Omsk, Siberia. As you might know, we, the Regional Church of Hanover, maintain a partnership with the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Urals, Siberia and the Far East.

Marie, Elvira and Johanna live in a small Russian village that has a long Russo-German tradition. All three are about 80 years old and longstanding pillars of the local Lutheran congregation. One of them, Johanna, even used to act as a preacher for many years and is being called in still today when a funeral is about to take place.

Meanwhile, most members of the congregation have either moved to Germany or died; the old women are left alone.

"The three of us are too old," Johanna says, "we do not have the strength anymore. Not for the congregation and not for looking after the prayer house." Thus this house is to be closed now; though, not without a special service. The three women want to bid their farewell to the place where God was at home, where they had sung and prayed, cried and laughed.

So we gathered at this prayer house: The three women in their best Sunday clothes and colourful headscarves, members from the congregation at Omsk and we – the guests from Germany.

All three told us about their experiences in the past years: the christening celebrations when the prayer house and the garden filled up with people, about the services and about the preachers that strengthened the congregations but then moved to Germany. And they spoke about what had to be done in this congregation, the tasks that they had shouldered together.

Marie, Elvira and Johanna sang for us, the old melancholic songs from the Brethren tradition, about the Lord Jesus, who walks in front of us, and about the festive celebration at the end of all days when there will be a reunion with those we loved and who are deeply missed.

In their thoughts, the prayer house filled once more with the many people that had sought comfort in this place, and found hope.

The end of all things is near. You must be self-controlled and alert to be able to pray..... Suddenly: these words – so close.

And then we prayed together and thanked God for the positive encounters in this house; for all the blessings God had provided for this congregation, for those who put themselves into His service.

And then we celebrated the Holy Communion and said the Lord's Prayer. Well, and thereafter we removed everything that made this house into a prayer house: the cross, the altar, the plain pulpit, the pictures with religious motives, the hymn books and the bibles.

At that point, the three sisters were not able to restrain their tears any longer, for the prayer house had been an important part of their lives and it hurt to see it empty and without purpose. "A beautiful farewell," they said later, "Yet so hard." And, "It gave us strength. God bless – and do return soon."

For me, the history of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia – in its European part as well as here, beyond the Ural Mountains – is an impressive example for the inherent strength of faith and hope. Political persecution, governmental despotism, firing squads and exile – the congregations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century suffered and survived all of this!

Secretly, in hospitable houses, Christians met up to sing and pray in their native tongue. When pastors were jailed or shot dead, preachers were appointed from their midst, who could continue spreading the Good News of living hope.

What it means to open homes to each other without complaining to offer food and shelter and material aid – often for many days - and to serve as good managers of God's different gifts for the good of others – members of these congregations can witness this impressively.

People such as Johanna, Elvira and Marie do not have to think about being there for the congregation – to praise God; responsibilities had to be taken on as there was hardly anybody else they could have delegated to.

For they were gifted, and felt that God had given them talents, they chose to serve God.

Whoever preaches, must preach God's messages, whoever serves must serve with the strength that God gives him (or her), so that in all things praise must be given to God.

Many of us here and now, at the International Hanover Worship, are no strangers to this kind of thinking. We, too, are aware of the tasks ahead of us and we, too, trust that our talents are sufficient to fulfil these assignments well; within our congregations but also in our families, our jobs and in society. Without voluntary commitment, a lot of what is important to us would have no future. This applies to our own church and often even more so to our partner churches all over the world.

In contrast to the congregations in Asia Minor, whom the First Epistle of Peter addresses, we are not living in anticipation of a perishing world; at least, I do not. We know that this world was given to us as a present; we may shape it though must act in a sustainable way, for future generations.

Yet I wish to live in anticipation of the forthcoming world! This can help us to live the fate we were given sensibly and responsibly and in joy; without having to expect everything right here, right now. Awaiting in serenity and joyousness what is coming to us; we can accept and shape our charges.

This fills us with living hope and so we look forward to possessing the rich blessing that God keeps for his people. Amen.

*And God's peace which is for beyond human understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in union with Christ Jesus.*