

Service Hannover International Worship August 17, 2008  
Bernd Wrede, Elisabethgemeinde Langenhagen

Romans 6, 19 - 23

Grace be with you  
And peace from God, our father,  
and from our Lord, Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Change, that is the big word, the mantra, in an election campaign.

Even though this campaign takes place several thousand miles from here,  
sometimes I get the feeling as if we in Germany are right in the middle of it, too.

Obama or McCain?  
People in our country are discussing this with a vengeance,  
and most of them seem to know the outcome already.

Maybe wishful thinking plays a role here.

Change, that is Senator Obamas mantra – and the crowds are roaring back at him:

Yes, we can!

Well, what is it that they can do?

Is it: We can change ourselves?

Is it: Together we can lead to change?  
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Is it: We can change the world to be a better place?

I think, we are witnessing once again something very American.  
Something, which is an integral part of that country:  
Change, progress, improvement.

Obama claims:  
I want to change the way of politics in Washington!

Less partisanship, more common effort for the good of all.

My hunch is – even with so many Germans approving of Obama – if he would be a  
German politician and if he would also call for change – he would receive much less  
applause.

Aren't we in Germany much more timid, even fearful, when someone comes up to us  
and confronts us with change, with new ways of doing things?

And are we not right to be so skeptical? Have we not seen often enough that change ends up as a bag of hot air?  
That nothing has changed for the better?

Privatising German mail service?

Has this kind of change made anything better than before?

Have we not seen many post offices closing?

And all these different tariffs on our telephone bills?  
Who can understand all those numbers?

And if one tries to get help from a call-center all one gets is a busy-signal

Change? No!  
There is nothing positive in it!

Lets look at today's epistle from the letter to the Romans.

It is clear to see that Paul, too, confronts the Christians in Rome with the message to change!

Of course, he is  
not campaigning like a politician, but he is not unaware of his constituents – or make that readers of his letter.

Their opinion matters to him.  
He wants their consent to his message.

And so he states his case like a good teacher,  
or should I say: a little bit like a politician?

He tries to soothe the readers of his letter:  
„I put this in human terms, because you are weak.“

So, let me remind you of what has been:

You were in a terrible state.  
You were in really bad shape.  
Your conduct was a disgrace.  
God did not like what he saw.

You were anything but  
Light of the world or Salt of the earth.

On the contrary: You were slaves of sin

And since you all know the story of creation and of paradise  
I don't have to use many words to remind you once again what sin means.

Sin – that is man's separation from God.

God's presence, his nearness, that's what paradise is all about.

Since the expulsion from paradise, you have been separated from God.

And you have experienced that your life has limits.

You are limited within the limits of your own possibilities and your own means to understand.

This is Paul's background when he refers to his readers as slaves of sin.

And by that he does not mean a single misdeed here or there.

Paul confronts his readers with a certain view of the human condition, it is an anthropology, which I find quite realistic.

We, too, understand very well the story of paradise, of expulsion from it, of paradise lost.

Looking at our own life's story, looking at failures and wrong turns we took.

If we are honestly looking at missed opportunities, at decisions, when we took the easy way,

or when we lost our bearings and pursued a weak compromise –  
we cannot simply gloss over all that.

Like paradise?

Paul writes: No! You are ashamed of those things now! They result in death!

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

some of us have resigned ourselves to a pessimistic understanding of man.

Should we blame them?

Aren't they the realists?

Is it not their way of avoiding disappointment?

Change? Progress? Improvement?

Some of us will say: Same old song! Same old story!

It doesn't matter who runs for office –

Man is man – he can't change, he won't change!

Paul, however, does not stop here.

... that is, with this assessment of man.

He would not have taken all these troubles to travel to the corners of the world which was known then,

if he had wanted to spread this type of anthropology.

What he did:

He baptized – so to speak – his understanding of the human condition.

By taking Jesus Christ into your lives,  
by faithfully accepting his guidance for your lives,  
you are loved by God.

Taking it from there Paul completely changes his description of the human life.

He uses completely different words now:  
„The benefit you reap leads to holiness.“

God has come close to you in Jesus Christ – God himself  
has bridged the separation from you – it was his will.  
You are free from eternal pessimism.  
You are free from the eternal sadness about the loss of paradise.

Free from this sadness...

The other day my wife and I were traveling in Havelberg, on the Elbe river, and we visited the huge cathedral on a hill overlooking the town.  
In the center of the cathedral stood a huge gothic cross with Christ suffering, on the side two women mourning.

A sculpture, a scene of despair and sadness.

But then I saw:  
The wooden cross at its four ends was sprouting leaves, even small branches, there were fruit to be seen...

The cross – for us the new tree of paradise!

Change? Progress?

Paul says:  
„But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.“

Now, that is completely different from an understanding of men, which we can hear so often.

„Man is locked in itself. Human thinking always will remain gloomy. Fear dominates. Hope remains unspoken in the prisonlike human heart.“

Words taken from a programme to a play in a German theatre.

Is that our understanding? Our perspective?  
Is that grounded in our faith experience?  
No way!

Change? Progress? Improvement?  
Yes, it's possible!

And haven't we seen it? In our own lifetime? Right next door?

When we travel to Berlin - and it takes less than two hours by train from here - when we walk through the Brandenburg Gate and see the place where all of Germany celebrates its soccer team - and when we visit the Potsdamer Platz right where the wall once stood.

Yes, we can, change is possible.

And, traveling onward, in all directions from Germany: all our neighbours are our friends.

Unthinkable before.

Change is possible – in Lagenhagen, where I come from – we celebrated an ecumenical church rally in the beginning of July.

And we found - working together – protestants and catholics - a little bit of ecumenical paradise.

Unthinkable just 50 or maybe only 30 years ago.

Change is possible.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all our understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in our Lord, Jesus Christ. AMEN.