

Sermon 21st March 2010 Petri Church Kleefeld

Text: Hebrews 5, 7 – 9

Dear brothers and sisters,

It was in 1905 when in Visby, the capital of the Swedish island of Gotland, a mass grave from the year 1361 was discovered. The Danish king Waldemar Atterdag had conquered the island. Among other finds was that of a knight whose body had been to a great extent preserved by his armour. His face could be seen and also his mouth with all its teeth. His mouth was not closed; it was wide open paralysed by fear and pain like a silent never ending cry - a shocking moment for those who lifted the visor. Later one of them asked: Is this the cry of the voiceless, of millions of soldiers who died in wars; is this the cry that seeks for an answer to the question why so many have died through cruel and senseless violence?

When I recently read about this find, I was reminded of the woodcutting by the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch "The Scream". It may be familiar to you. This picture depicts a person whose mouth is wide open, both arms are pressed against the head and the eyes look weary and empty. It is as if the whole person consists of one horrible scream, the epitome of despair and fear, of the apocalypse now.

Both incidents, Visby and the painting of the scream, are like a mirror that reflects the brutal reality of people who suffer all over the world up to the present day. These are the cries and tears of those who died or mourned in the many cruelties of past wars and still do so in present wars and civil wars such as in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Sudan or elsewhere. We also look into the empty eyes of those 5000 children who die daily because of unsafe water or poor sanitation and hygiene, as we learnt in last month's sermon on water. And we see pictures of shocked and desperate people who wander about aimlessly because they have lost their houses and all their belongings in the terrible earthquakes of Haiti and Chile. But away from big world-events there are also many cries and tears in our daily lives, sometimes open, sometimes hidden either forever or for a long time like the unbelievable abuse of boys and young people by priests and teachers in Catholic and public schools and also in parishes. This, indeed, is totally unacceptable and makes me very angry. What impact has all this had on the abused people, on their lives, on their attitude towards others? But I also hear the cries and know of the tears of those who have become lethargic or angry because their partner they live with never understands what's really going on inside them. I have to think of those who are hit by the bad news of an incurable illness; I have to think of those who become ill because they are constantly treated unjustly at their workplace. Last but not least I have to think of those who are trying hard but in vain to find any kind of work that they could live off and are suddenly being confronted by accusations of "late Roman decadence" and "effortless prosperity".

You may not believe it, but in the midst of all this anger, suffering and turmoil there is good news this day. It is written in the text of today's sermon. It is as if an angel would say to us the same words as to the shepherds in the Christmas story: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people." Here, in our letter to the Hebrews, we read: "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears..." Why is this good news? Why is it good news hearing about Jesus crying loud and weeping? What good is it to have a god who is as weak as us? Don't we need a strong fortress, a refuge and a shield to protect us from troubles and sorrows? Yes, we do need such a God, but at the same time we do not need a God who rules unreachably and in eternal perfection like the Greek Gods on Mount Olympus. Rather we need a God who we can address as a friend and who knows who we really are and how we really feel. Of course it helps to be able to pour out your heart to a friend of yours, but what good would it be if you had to be afraid of the idea that God might interpret your praying to him in tears as a lack of your belief and hold it against you? On the contrary, God understands and accepts you when you cry. Through his Son Jesus Christ he knows all about your desperate cries and tears. Though you may feel forsaken, you are not. You are never alone but can be sure of God's nearness and solidarity in all situations of life. Indeed, this is good news, isn't it? Indeed, this is a great comfort, isn't it? And it is something that can not be found in any of the other religions of this world.

Someone once said about Jesus: "I would not have believed any of his words if he hadn't cried: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And because he as a human being was so far down crying aloud "why" and "forsaken", one could perhaps also believe his other words which are from higher up."

And Simone Weil, a French philosopher, told about two prisoners in two adjacent cells. A wall separated them, they could, however, communicate with one another by knocks. The wall that separated them made communication possible. This is the same with our relationship to God. Feeling a wall between you and God, feeling separated from him does not cut off your communication with God. Perhaps the very cries you utter and tears you shed are the path along which the absent God comes back to you.

There is another message I would like to share with you this morning. This message is about "obedience". It is mentioned twice in our text: "Although he was the son of God, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him".

Well, as you all know, we have mixed feelings about the concept of obedience, especially here in Germany. Being traumatised by the Second World War we have too many negative connotations with the word "obedience". I was all the more surprised to read in an

encyclopaedia for Theology and Church, which was published after the war, namely in 1960, the following definition: Obedience means following the ordering will of an authority.

Obedience has to refrain from reviewing the content of an order. Obedience accepts an order not because it may be good but because it was ordered.

It is exactly this understanding of obeying which for centuries was exercised in educating children and finally led to the so called blind obedience in the time of the Nazi regime with all its disastrous after effects. Yet Germany had to wait until the end of the 60s before in the course of the students' revolt the young generation radically broke away from all oppressing authority and obedience. We all know that one of the significant outcomes of this was the so called anti-authoritarian education. Parents and teachers were not to tell their children what was right or wrong because the children would find out themselves. They need not obey. They didn't realise, however, that following your own inner voice is a kind of obeying as well. Thank goodness this extreme phase of education seems to have passed.

The key question as to the issue of obedience is whether obedience is called for in order to coerce one's own will on others or not. Obedience doesn't have to be negative, it can be positive. Just think of traffic signs and imagine what would happen if we didn't obey them. Or think of the financial markets. We all know what has happened because basic rules and regulations were not obeyed. Obedience, understood in a positive sense, can promote good life. Children need to know what is acceptable and what not, they need to know how they can develop their own personality to the full, but they also need to know their limits so that they will not harm others. In a way it is similar with the concept of "serving". In the words of today's gospel Jesus said at the end: "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve..." A long history of both caring for others but also of denying and enslaving yourself has followed this sentence. Serving can foster life but it can also stifle it. It is the same with obeying.

What kind of obedience is meant in our text? How did Jesus obey?

Well, it was not easy at all for Jesus to obey God in all situations. Just think of his inner fight in the garden of Gethsemane. It took him a long time and a lot of praying before he could say "May your will be done". Did Jesus at that time know what the will of God was? I do not know. All that was left to him was to trust that his father's will would lead to life. And so it did, not only for Jesus but for all of us. Through his death and resurrection Jesus Christ became "the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him", as is written in our text. But what does this mean exactly? How can we obey him? In daily life it is not easy to know what the will of God is. Of course there are the Ten Commandments. They are like a framework for knowing what God's will is, what is conducive to human society and leads to a caring life for all. But how do you interpret the framework in the context of individual situations of your life? How do you know how to obey in a positive sense?

When our former bishop Margot Käßmann resigned from her offices she mentioned in her press statement the advice of one of her counsellors. He had referred to a verse of the book of Jesus Sirach (37,17): Trust your own judgement, trust your own heart, for it is your most reliable counsellor. I deeply regret the stepping down of our former bishop. I think we all will miss her a lot; we will miss her courage, her openness, her sermons, her theological competence, her interfering in political issues from a Christian point of view, her spirituality. But I understand what she meant by quoting this verse. Her heart had said to her that she would lose her freedom and her authority to speak out openly on ethical issues in politics and society. Did she obey God in her resigning? Is following your heart or your own judgement the same as following God's will? I don't think one can ever answer questions like these with absolute certainty. Sometimes there is no clear cut way. Sometimes it is not possible to say for sure yes or no. In spite of scrutinising a situation there may remain ambivalence.

Where were there situations in your life when it was appropriate or even necessary to obey your own judgement, your own heart, God's will and not somebody else's? -

Käßmann finished her press statement by saying that one could never fall more deeply than into God's hands. This is, as it were, obeying God in a very deep sense: to put all your trust in him without any doubts. God will never let you go. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who understood his resistance against the Nazi regime as his way of obeying God, said something similar though in a completely different, namely life threatening situation. In prison he found himself torn between obeying and disobeying God wondering who he, Bonhoeffer, had become in the course of all the trials and tribulations. In March 1945, shortly before his execution, he put all his thoughts into his moving prayer "Who am I?"

To finish my sermon I quote extracts from this prayer:

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
equally, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?

Or am I only what I myself know of myself?

Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were
compressing my throat,

yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness ...

weary and empty at praying, at thinking...

faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?

Am I one person today and tomorrow another?

Am I both at once?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!

May God grant us this unshakable trust, especially when our whole world seems to fall apart.

May he hold us in his hands and lead us to life and eternal salvation.

Amen.

Pastor Michael Klatt