

Hannover International Worship

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Sermon on Luke 9, 10-17

The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters,

first of all, thank you very much for inviting me today; it has always been a pleasure to take part in the international services here in Hannover and to realize in a special way that we are all living – more or less – in an international and multilingual context – even in a city like Hannover.

Today I would like to bring to you greetings from the 11th Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation which took place in Stuttgart in July eight weeks ago.

We were more than 400 delegates from all over the world – representing the 145 member-churches of the Lutheran communion and 70 million members in more than 40 countries. Furthermore quite a number of representatives of churches, advisers and ecumenical observers, stewards and guests had accepted the invitation and had traveled to the capital city of Württemberg; all in all around 1000 persons attended the conference for eight days.

For those who took part this has been quite an impressive intercultural and ecumenical experience, although we certainly concentrated on Lutheran traditions and Lutheran liturgy and theology; I am convinced that all who attended returned home with fresh and vivid impressions of a growing church who is acting in a worldwide context.

Let me share with you this morning some insights and ideas which I took from Stuttgart and which might be of some interest for all of us.

From my church ten persons took part in the assembly; our delegation represented equally lay and ordained persons, men and women and young people under 30.

Interesting enough there was also a group of theology-students from the church of Hannover, who served in Stuttgart as stewards and helped to make the assembly a success – and who became ambassadors for the future of our church.

For those of us who this morning are more at home in the Anglican tradition and the church-life of the Church of England, it might be of some interest that the Archbishop of Canterbury had been invited as a keynote speaker and he addressed the assembly in a really inspiring and encouraging manner.

We also heard addresses from the representatives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches – which made us aware that the reformed traditions are also alive even among some of our member-churches, for example in the United Church in the Netherlands but also in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.

Embedded and at home in the Lutheran tradition of Protestantism we all felt honored by the presence of Christians from the Anglican and reformed churches at the assembly. In the context of living and thinking ecumenically it is at the beginning of the third millennium hardly possible to call for an assembly without inviting sisters and brothers from other Christian traditions.

This is certainly also true for representatives from the Ecumenical Council of Churches but also for the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church. We are all challenged to work for justice and to strive for unity among us!

For the second time - after 1952 in Hannover – the assembly gathered in Germany and our hosts in Württemberg used the chance to present protestant church life to the delegates from all over the world. Our churches have come a long way from the days of reformation and have experienced dark and light phases in history especially in the 20th century - being very much aware of failure and guilt, of repentance and forgiveness. We are and have been grateful for ecumenical hospitality by other churches – especially from World War II - and new chances and challenges - embraced by a loving and forgiving God.

The theme for the 11th Assembly had been taken from the Lord's prayer: "Give us today our daily bread". This prayer-phrase did accompany us through the entire conference; starting in the morning with devotion and the sharing of bread and wine, being reflected in the discussions in the international village-groups, where we met in groups of 20 to 30 persons every morning, broadened in the sessions on the ecumenical challenges and highlighted last but not least in the public hearings on food security, illegitimate debts and living with HIV and AIDS.

I have brought with me today copies of the logo of the assembly and you received it when you entered the church. Let us have a look at it.

This logo refers to the corn which is sowed in autumn, which is growing in spring and is being harvested in summer and which is used and processed to make bread in order to feed people. It also reminds us of the symbolic meaning of the seed, which is laid in the ground in order to die and to bring new fruit and life and which is a symbol for the death and resurrection of Christ.

If you look at the symbol as a whole picture, you might be reminded of a loaf of bread and the old custom of bakers and house-wives to bless the bread in signing it with the sign of the cross; and you might realize the dynamic swing, which refers to the work of the Holy Spirit who accompanies the churches and gives us freedom and imagination and hope for the future.

Give us today our daily bread!

When we planned the Assembly and thought of the theme, we felt it would be rather challenging to reflect on the meaning of daily bread in our daily life – in a personal way but also in an international setting.

What are we praying for when we pray the Our Father – what does it mean for us as individuals but also as a congregation and a church – as “faith-based” organizations in the second decade of our century?

After the decision had been made to focus on the fourth pledge of the Our Father, we certainly saw the need to discuss day-to-day questions of food security and hunger, of the necessity of global sharing of resources and the challenges of genetic engineering of food. We certainly saw the need to reflect on a responsible and sustainable life-style of Christians in times of global warming and the global challenges for justice and peace in the civil society.

From the beginning it had become clear that the classical “loaf of bread” has a clear meaning only for persons from Europe and the western world. In Asia it is obviously rice and in Africa it is certainly corn and fish which is regarded as daily bread for the people; and we had in mind all children who have been taught the Lord’s prayer and the different ways in which mothers and fathers, teachers, deacons and pastors would explain the very meaning of daily bread in different cultures.

Daily bread needs to be defined in the context of the people. I wonder how you explained this very term to your children and also to yourselves....

However, covering all these dimensions of daily bread would have been certainly not enough for a gathering of Christians from all over the world who would meet in order to decide on guidelines, programmes and policies for the next seven years ahead of us.

Praying the Lord's Prayer day by day in our personal life and certainly every morning in Stuttgart in our services we were convinced that the symbolic meaning of our daily bread needed to be explored also in a spiritual way.

This prayer is about giving and receiving, about us being dependent on others who care and feed us from the beginning of our life on earth until the end. It is about us living in a community of people not as an isolated individual person but with social needs and social responsibilities; and it is finally about our "bread for the day" – on a special day and at a specific time in my life.

Let us reflect for a moment on our own history with the Lord's Prayer. Who taught it to you and how did it become part of your religious life? Has it been easy to learn it and what has been difficult to accept? Are there special phrases which you like most or which became more important during your own spiritual journey? For whom and with whom did you ever say these words – outside a church-service?

Impressive memories came up to my mind when I started to think about it. I remember well my teacher at primary school, who taught the Our Father to me and my class-mates, she made us stand up and speak with a strong voice. Furthermore, there are several occasions in my life when I prayed the Lord's prayer on my own, with family and friends - and very often with sisters and brothers in a service - in times of concern, in times of hardship and distress and in times when orientation was needed and important decisions needed to be made.

You might add further occasions in the course of your lifelong journey of faith; a prayer of comfort and concern, a prayer which is always reminding us about what really counts in life.

When some of us, who had been involved in the planning sessions for the assembly, referred to Martin Luther's small catechism and his explanation of the Lords prayer, we were stunned by the broad and meaningful understanding of Luther's interpretation, which sounds rather modern and down to earth even today.

Martin Luther says:

God is giving the daily bread also without us praying - to all (evil) human beings, but we are praying in this prayer, that He allows us to know this and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.

And Martin Luther continues: what does the daily bread mean?

And his answer:

Everything which is necessary for our body and our life, like food, drink, clothes and shoes, house and household, ground and cattle, money and property, faithful marriage, faithful children and helpers, faithful superiors, good governance, good weather, peace, health, dignity and honour, good friends, neighbours and furthermore.

It is obvious. These words certainly have been a good starting point for our discussions; and we explored on that and discussed the meaning - and listened carefully to those among us who gave us insights into their personal life and the special challenges in a special context. Story-telling became an important way of doing theology in an international and intercultural context, and I have learned a lot.

I remember for example very well a delegate from Brazil who talked about the fishermen in his country and the hard work on the boats and the threat of overfishing the sea in order to fulfill consumers demands in Europe; or a young sister from the Republic of Congo who talked to us in the village-group about the desperate need for good governance and faithful leaders in a situation of civil war and lacking structures of order; or I think of the witness of a Lutheran brother from India who talked about the desire for dignity and justice in the perspective of the Dalit community.

These are only three examples; however, I think it becomes clear how meaningful our motto had become in today's context of Christians in very different situations.

But again:

What does it mean for us to pray the Lord's prayer day by day and on Sundays in our churches in relation to our words and actions and deeds?

We also highlighted the dimension of "the gifts of grace" for "all of us" in the very phrase of the prayer: give us today our daily bread; we thought about talents we received in our life and how we are using these gifts for the sake of others.

In addressing God as the creator of life and the giver of bread we acknowledge and bear in mind that we are not alone, but members of the family of God. It is the daily bread of all of us, we are praying for and while praying I have to ask myself in a concrete

situation: who is my brother, who is my sister, who is my neighbour who is asking like me for the daily bread in life.

Praying the Lord's prayer also reminds us of the grace of receiving; I am praying for all what is needed for my life – in a material and spiritual way - and while doing so I realize that I depend on someone who is offering "bread of life" for me and all the others I am praying for. I am praying for getting ready to receive and take gifts for granted –without having worked for it and having deserved it, without asking myself whether I was "good enough" to receive it.

Dear sisters and brothers, we can not explore the meaning of our prayer without referring to the one who offers us eternal life, who becomes the bread of life for everyone of us.

Jesus Christ – whose presence among us we are celebrating in every Eucharist – in the sharing of bread and wine among brothers and sisters in Christ he is giving himself to us as a gift, as a presence. He is binding us together and is keeping us together with his words of love and forgiveness. "I am the life-giving bread. He who turns to me, will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never suffer thirst." (John 6.35). This is the basis of our belief and the starting point of all our thoughts on how we are going to build a church which is open and welcoming to everyone.

His word and His loving affection for us are indeed comforting and encouraging – and at the same time it is an obligation to bring life and comfort - the good news - to others who are in need. His word and His loving affection are inviting us into the communion of those who are lost - and found. In those moments in our life, when we feel alone and isolated from everybody and the sources of life, the "Our Father" might bring us back into the spiritual and real communion of sinners and saints.

Psalm 111

Praise the Lord.

I will extol the Lord with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly.

Great are the works of the Lord;

they are pondered by all who delight in them.

Glorious and majestic are his deeds,

and his righteousness endures for ever.

He has caused his wonders to be remembered;

the Lord is gracious and compassionate.

He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant for ever.

He has shown his people the power of his works,
giving them the lands of other nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are steadfast for ever and ever,
done in faithfulness and uprightness.

He provided redemption for his people;
he ordained his covenant for ever –
holy and awesome is his name.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow his precepts have good understanding .
To him belongs eternal praise.

Dear brothers and sisters.

At the end of our service we are going to pray in Christ's name – let us do this with
gratitude and full of hope that today and tomorrow we shall receive what is needed for us
and those we love and care for.

And the peace of God be with you always. Amen.