

Hannover International Worship – Petri-Church - April 21st 2013

Readings: Psalm 1, Luke 24

Sermon: OLKR Pastor Rainer Kiefer

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

Dear brothers and sisters,

It is almost a tradition by now – once a year I receive a phone call or an e-mail from Michael Klatt presenting the invitation to take part in one of the services of Hanover International Worship. Every time, I feel it is a great privilege but certainly also a challenge to offer a sermon in English in an English-speaking congregation. But I accepted again with joy and started to work on such a “word for the week” which might encourage and strengthen us in our faith and give us orientation for the challenges we are confronted with in our daily lives.

I thank you very much for the warm welcome and the way you introduced me to the congregation. I was listening carefully to what you said about me – and I guess most of it is true.

Starting point and headline for today’s sermon are words from the letter to the Church at Colossae. It is an interesting letter to read and it gives us some insight into intellectual controversy in the first decades of the Christian movement. Maybe you will be curious after listening to my sermon and you will find time in the coming days to study this letter a bit more carefully.

The author – according to the tradition, it is the apostle Paul – explains the main principles of the Christian belief in order to offer arguments against a Hellenistic philosophy which seemed to have attracted the young congregation in Colossae. It is called “Gnosis” and the ideas of this school have influenced the way of thinking also in Christian congregations in those days in Asia Minor.

Who am I? What can help me to come to a clear understanding of life? How do I find peace and salvation? What does it mean to be a Christian?

Basic questions of humankind who always deserve an answer – and the answers based on our belief are rather specific.

Today, we are no longer convinced that this letter to the church in Colossae was actually written by Paul himself. Looking more carefully at the grammar for example or the words used, there are many reasons to come to this conclusion.

It seems quite possible that a theologian of the following generation – maybe an assistant or student of Paul – was the author. As you might know, using the name of a teacher or writing in the name of a teacher was a common practice in those days and

was not meant to deceive anybody, but was used to gain respect and attention of those you were addressing.

Paul's letter to the church at Colossae has become part of our biblical heritage. Let us now listen carefully to the ancient words and let us pray that God will help us to understand and let us pray that these words will reach our hearts and minds.

I am reading from chapter 2 the verses 6 and 7: according to the translation of Heinz W. Corriser, a Jewish philosopher.

You have come to accept the proclamation of Christ Jesus as Lord. Well then, let it be he by whom you order your lives, being rooted and grounded in him, being established in the faith as you were taught it, and offering thanksgiving in abundance.

The Lord has risen – he has risen indeed!

These famous ancient words, dear sisters and brothers, are part of the Easter liturgy all over the world, when Christians celebrate the good news of God's victory over death on early Easter morning – just like we did three weeks ago.

I guess many of us have good memories of these special Easter services and joined into this liturgy on many occasions.

The Lord has risen – he has risen indeed!

Every time when we are proclaiming Christ Jesus as our Lord – and most of the time we do this in a liturgical way – we are joining a massive movement of protesters against suffering and death. This is how the German theologian Ernst Lange described our faith a few decades ago – protesters against suffering and death. We are protesting against the dark powers of hatred and violence and we bear witness to our faith/our God, so that love and reconciliation will prevail! We confirm for our own life that we believe in the words of Mary Magdalene and the disciples on their way to Emmaus, who had experienced the presence of the risen Christ and had responded to his call to follow him.

His words and the stories about him have become also relevant for our lives today, for how we see the world and for understanding why we are here.

You have come to accept the proclamation of Christ Jesus as Lord. Well then, let it be he by whom you order your lives, being rooted and grounded in him.

How do I order my life? How is your life ordered? This is a question which came to my mind when I was meditating over these words to the Christians at Colossae.

Generally speaking I am afraid to say: my life is ordered by my calendar. Almost seven days a week my outlook calendar on my computer orders my life: meetings, conferences, job-related tasks and responsibilities, appointments with colleagues - it's all in my calendar and it offers a structure in my daily life; even personal appointments nowadays have found their way into this calendar: birthdays and visits, important phone calls, doctor's appointments, maintenance around the house, check-ups and repairs for the car, money transfers, holidays.....

And this is how many of us structure our lives – at least on a superficial level.

Honestly speaking, I would still prefer to get my life ordered by myself. I would like to decide what's most relevant – not only in terms of commitment and duties, but also in terms of values.

Honesty and friendship are still important, faithful and fulfilling love, health and security, an interesting job, maybe success, certainly independence.

But: let it be he by whom you order your lives, being rooted and grounded in him....

When I was a student, I was part of a Sunday school team in a children's hospital. Head of our team was Sister Anna. We met every Friday afternoon to plan Sunday school and Anna taught us a lot about being a religious woman and about her understanding of life. She enjoyed her post as a clinic pastor, she was accepted and loved, and had become friends with many people during her years of service.

But then, out of the blue, she received, if I remember correctly, a call from her order to leave as soon as possible in order to take over a new challenging post in a difficult environment.

For us, this was sad news, because she was going to leave a blossoming work, and certainly we as students felt somewhat abandoned. But she explained to us that she believed that Christ was calling her and that she did not see any chance not to follow him.....

You might say, well, this is not surprising for a religious woman and this is what we tend to expect. For me as a student, it was a convincing example how a friend of mine allowed Christ to order her life; it taught me a lot about what it means to listen to what God wants us to be and to work in the perspective of the coming kingdom.

Maybe this is what "let it be he by whom you order your lives" means.

Often it is easier to go with the crowd or to listen to those who seem to know what is good for you and your life. However, it is much more challenging to listen to those who question our life-style and our plans, and listening to them might make our life even more difficult. But it could also help us understand what plans God may have for us.

People like us, who are ready to listen to the words of the Bible, who are ready to trust in the biblical stories we are telling each other, will experience that the plans and perspectives and the goals we had for our life can be changed and that a new order in life might become relevant.

Interestingly enough, people often experience that these unexpected changes in life are fulfilling and somehow the right thing to do.

We all know of men and women who have learnt this by experience.

When we meet others, we can share these stories. I have learnt and gained a lot from encounters with Christians from different traditions and backgrounds – from those who

come from other countries, but are living among us now, or from those we meet in the framework of international church partnership programs.

They have all encouraged me to speak more freely about my understanding of being accompanied by Christ – like the disciples on the way to Emmaus; about what it means for you and me to let it be he who orders my life.

It is great when we can wholeheartedly say: I am not alone. Yes, I believe that I am accompanied and that I am guided through my life.

You have come to accept the proclamation of Christ Jesus as Lord. Well then, let it be he by whom you order your lives continue to live with him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and offering thanksgiving in abundance.

It is not surprising, dear sisters and brothers, that our text is ending with the offering of thanksgiving in abundance.

It seems to be part of the miracle of life that a guided life that I cannot control myself, can lead to fulfillment and joy – but often it takes a long time until we are ready to except this.

Happy are those who find joy in obeying the Law of the Lord and they study it day and night.

These words from Psalm 1 came to my mind when I meditated on our text and we have listen to these words together today already.

They are like trees that grow beside a stream, that bear fruit at the right time and whose leaves do not dry up. They succeed in everything they do.

The symbol of a tree with strong roots and green leaves and that is full of fruits might be a promise which will help us to understand what is meant by being rooted and grounded in Christ.

We have to explore it again and again; we have to talk with others to see clearer, and we have the chance to worship together and find new insights into the miracles of faith - by singing songs of joy, by listening to his words, by praying together.

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