

Hanover International Worship, Sermon on Hebrews, ch. 12, vss 12 – 25a, 2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Jan. 19th, 2014

Dear Sisters and Brothers!

As this is the first Service in 2014, we rightly may claim to launch a new project ending a happy and delighting summit in December, 9 lessons and carols again!

Launching a new project—well, all of us know the basic ABC of project management. Define your aim, describe the steps toward it including the aims in between, check your resources, look for advice and allies, sketch your PR—and always keep the control button pressed: Is all that stuff realizable?

You will know the French poet Antoine de St. Exupéry. In his novel *La Citadelle—Die Stadt in der Wüste*—he dug deeper: When you drum up men to build a ship, he wrote, don't teach them about cutting and working wood, constructing ships—create in them, wake in them a longing for the wide and endless sea.

So does the author of the letter to the Hebrews in our text. He depicts an aim of breathtaking beauty, happiness, splendor and reconciliation. And, so he assures his readers, you are already running on the home stretch! Some hardships are still to come, probably worse than ever experienced, but soon you will have reached everlasting glory.

Well, this apocalyptic scenery reminds of the visions in St. John's Revelation. Apocalyptic literature knows no hope for God's Kingdom being realized in time and world. This is a bit cross compared with our struggle for justice, peace and the preservation of creation. Admittedly, we feel a bit skeptical looking at such heavenly pictures of hope and glory. On the other hand they remain fascinating!

Apocalyptic imagery has the function of comforting oppressed, persecuted, hopeless people. We are not suffering as Christians; we do not live in Syria, Egypt, Nigeria, Saudi–Arabia, Pakistan. And—are we Hebrews? In which respect are we concerned?

Well, Hebrews. During the 14th and 13th century BC Palestinian vassal rulers complained to their overlords, Pharaohs Amenophis II, his successors Echnaton and Tutenchamun about certain hapiru or habiru of playing havoc with fields, orchards, even villages. They asked for soldiers to protect them against these roaming bandits. The semitic root 'aba' means 'pass by, cross, overstep'. These habiru respected no frontiers, they apparently were not a people, more a social class appearing here and there in the Ancient Near East. Some of them were caught in Egypt and had to perform forced labor. Later, when some of these habiru had become free farmers in the Judaeian and Samaritan hills, in the Galilee, they confessed that God had chosen them to be His people and had freed them from slavery. The name "Hebrews" turned out to be a name of honour, name of God's chosen people.

And it is this name of honour with which the author addresses his readers. He seems to be a very cultivated Hellenistic teacher writing the best Greek in the NT. His rhetorical education appears in a creative variety of literal forms, and he also boasts gifts as spiritual guide and - well, management consultant; not to mention his astonishing knowledge of and familiarity with the Old Testament, which he mostly quotes in its Greek Translation, the Septuagint. Probably he is writing from Rome, and it is widely, although not generally, assumed that he writes in the nineties of the first century AD.

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This is a time in which—especially in Asia Minor—the threat of the imperial cult is growing. Those believers in Jesus the Messiah who meanwhile are expelled from the synagogues can no longer enjoy the shelter of Judaism which Rome accepted as *religio licita*—tolerated cult. The feeling of oppression rises, some believers have been expropriated, beatings have occurred. When will it come to bloodshed?

I do no longer speak of “Christians” in these early times. The addressed, these “Hebrews”, regard themselves, as the name unmistakably indicates, as members of the Jewish religion and community, although many of them are not Jews by birth, but by conversion to the One and Only God of Israel. They believe having been accepted into His covenant with Abraham and from Sinai by the death and resurrection of Jesus from Nazareth, whom they confess as the Messiah. So better we name them “Talmide Jeschuá”, “Disciples of Jesus”!

They are walking in the traces of Israel: just as Israel walked through the desert into liberty and a land of its own, so these disciples of Jesus are walking through times and an always changing, at present menacing environment. The community addressed in the letter to the Hebrews understands itself as Wandering People of God. The heritage of the *habiru* has been partly kept!

But they are not only wandering, they are also running. Another image is appearing before us. They have to stand the long distance run of faith. Believers are not to be found in the terraces, but in the arena, not in the houses, but on the pilgrimage.

And it is this world of sports competition where the author’s suggestions make sense. To reach the aim, to win the eternal glory, stiffen your

drooping arms and shaking knees—how could you run trembling, shaking, collapsing, in doubt or even in quarrel about the direction?

These pastoral encouragements have fascinated me for decades. In fact, as pastor I tried to have them present always - and to act accordingly, of course. The letter to the Hebrews knows no hierarchy, no administration—you only hear of “Leaders” (by personal authority, not officially), and “Teachers”—that’s it. The community members, the “Talmide Jeschuá” are encouraged to look carefully and lovingly upon each other: no one shall forfeit or run short of the grace of God. No one shall break away from faith! This is kind of a mutual and common priesthood.

And I am sure that we don’t need much help in understanding what the bitter, noxious or poisonous root / weed / plant means. We all remember such deplorable proceedings. If you notice the plant, danger is at hand. It will need labour, diligence, patience and love to heal the contamination. The nearer at the center of a parish, a society, a community, the worse the damage.

Aim at peace with all men. Chase peace, run for peace is more correct: we clearly see how difficult this long time run of faith proves to be. Act and behave as the holies of God, as God’s beloved and chosen people. Jewry always knew that being chosen by God did not mean to be the pick of mankind but to carry the burden of a great and heavy responsibility!

Again: these Talmide Jeschuá see themselves as nothing else than as members of God’s chosen people, and the new covenant is an enlarged and updated covenant, but by no means a new one instead of a worn out and abolished old one!

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Esau is presented as an example demonstrating the opposite. In short: Esau is the greedy type, unable to control himself, who, coming home hungry, at the enticing smell of a freshly prepared meal doesn't bother to sell his birthright as firstborn which would secure him the father's blessing. Surely no participant in the long distance run or the pilgrimage can expect to reach the goal by greed.

From here we may once more look at the goal the author describes, the heavenly Jerusalem, the joy of the Believers of all times gathering from their roaming, their fighting in God's presence. There is a kind of greedy soil in us, an inclination to arrange things like a good bookkeeper. We classify in effort and profits, in work done and reward. If we are succumbing to this inclination, we have fallen out of grace. The aim is not reward. It is grace. And it means fighting not to fall out of grace.

Once there was a mountain, surrounded by fire, wind, darkness, unbearable sounds of trumpets and a terrifying voice, the starting point of the long distance run, the pilgrimage, the covenant. But the Law, the Torah, was given as grace, out of grace.

Centuries later a lonely and desperate prophet arrived at the place. There was a quiet, hovering voice. It comforted and renewed him, stiffened his drooping arms and knees, assured him of continuing grace and sent him anew. He had expected—and wanted—his end. Without knowing he reached a preliminary goal in his pilgrimage and fighting.

The goal which the author is depicting to motivate and encourage also us Hebrews is a celestial one, gaining all its splendor and beauty from the grace, the passionate love of the One and Holy, whose name shall be blessed for ever and ever.

So the confidence that we are embraced in and by His passionate love with all its power is our motivation. It is only with trembling that we may realize: these goals, steps and actions among us, for each of us are no fiction, no phantasy. All the best has been achieved for us—let's pass it on.

Amen.

Gerd Brockhaus, 19.01.2014