

Hannover International Worship
Petri Church Hannover
18th May 2014
Jubilate
Matthew 15, 32 – 39
Sermon by Dr. Rudolf Ficker

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Our text begins with Jesus saying that he had compassion on the crowd. Compassion is the attitude of Jesus toward humans and it should be the attitude of Christians as well. In fact compassion is a common human attitude, which is emphasized also in other religious traditions, in Buddhism for example. Fortunately in cases of disaster people often show compassion. If we had no compassion we were unable to cope with the challenges of our world. Without compassion we would be unfit for life in the community of humans on earth. This is why we occasionally need to be reminded of the importance of compassion. We need to cultivate compassion.

Compassion is a very important attitude in a world where we face the challenge of people suffering in various ways in our immediate surroundings and in the world at large. Some are afflicted by serious accidents or natural disasters like the miners and their families in Turkey and the people afflicted by the floods in Serbia and Bosnia. Others are victims of terrorist attacks like the girls who have been kidnapped in Nigeria, and others suffer from diseases, mental disorder or simply old age. And there are people who go through the horrors of war and civil war, e.g. in Syria, Central Africa or the Ukraine. And millions of humans are victims of social injustice, oppression and lack of rights.

Given the immense suffering in the world you could fall into resignation. But for all that, is resignation the appropriate answer? Will resignation contribute to a change for the better? Or you could fall into joining the suffering in their complaints, tears and anger. But will it help if you lose yourself in the misery of others? Is it rather not compassion that can make a real difference? Jesus shows compassion; that means he has not just pity for the sufferings of others, he is not just identifying himself with their problems; he rather has the desire to bring about change and to solve problems. Compassion is an active attitude aiming to remedy the situation by mobilizing and encouraging people.

Coming back to the scene reported in our text, we see that Jesus very clearly perceives the situation of the people. He puts himself in their position. After three days with him in a remote place their provisions have run out, they are hungry and they badly need some food. The crowd must be fed. In order to solve a problem it is necessary to realise it, to name it and to share your observation with others. And this is exactly what Jesus does.

His disciples understand him very well. But they seem to show an attitude of resignation and see an additional problem: "Where are we to get bread enough in this remote place?" You can always find reasons that prevent you from acting and from seeking solutions. For the disciples the case is clear: it is impossible to provide the crowds with bread. There is no catering service available and now supermarket close by. And if there was, they surely wouldn't have enough money to pay for provisions for a large crowd. In the attitude of the disciples is reflected what we also experience facing misery in this world. We see additional problems. We tend to feel unable to change things because we lack resources. But is it true that there are no resources available? Are we really helpless?

Jesus' response to the objection of the disciples is to make them aware of the resources they have. There is bread available and even some fish. Admittedly, it is nothing compared to the magnitude of the crowd. Seven loaves and a few small fish for four thousand men, besides women and children! A sense of realism tells us that this cannot work. Maybe the disciples wanted to bring Jesus back to earth mentioning the numbers of loaves and fish. Numbers are always likely to be convincing arguments. We believe in numbers. Looking at the numbers it is clear: We do not have enough money for development aid. There are not enough funds for early education and kindergartens etc. There is a lack of funds and there are enormous problems to be tackled. Numbers often seem to be discouraging.

Jesus is neither impressed nor discouraged by the numbers. His reaction is: Just put to use the resources you have. And if you have only seven loaves and a few small fish, put them to use! Compassion means to put to use what you have available. If you save only one person, you save the whole world, says a Jewish proverb.

The result is overwhelming. People ate and were satisfied and plenty of food was left. But before we marvel at the unexpected result we have to take note of a small but important theological detail. Before bread and fish were distributed Jesus gave thanks to God. The resources which we have available in fact are not our resources, we are not the owners. What is available to us is a gift of God. Using the available resources we in fact act as God's trustees. Giving thanks therefore is important to remind all of us that we are not the masters but only servants. In this attitude we can use the resources we have, however small they may be and we will see they are sufficient; there is enough for all when we use what is given to us. Maybe we can learn this from some Pentecostal churches in Latin America where members pray and put to use the little resources they have. It seems to work.

As you have heard when I was introduced, I have spent a considerable part of my professional life in the development service of the Protestant Churches. I am convinced that the actions of Jesus can be understood as structural models for development aid. Compassion is the basic attitude. To encourage and mobilize people to use the resources they have and to understand themselves as trustees who put to use what they have received from God is equally important. And finally, not to act in lieu of others but to encourage and enable them to act on their own corresponds to the paradigm of Jesus.

With this remark I could conclude. However, there may be some so far unspoken questions. Why do we still read and retell such stories? Why and for whom are they written in the New Testament? Are they not untrustworthy and impossible? Are such stories not a bit too much for the modern educated mind? And do we really need such a story when we want to reflect on compassion?

The answer I suggest is this: The stories about Jesus have been written and handed down to us, because they also have a meaning which goes beyond what has been said so far about compassion and the bold use of small resources. To read these stories solely as encouragement for compassionate action would be a too narrow approach. And such stories certainly were not told to make people worry about the possibility or impossibility of miracles.

Those who first recounted such stories about Jesus, by telling them wanted to confess Jesus as the one who fulfils the hopes and promises of the Prophets. Among the believers of their times the followers of Jesus wanted to testify to Jesus as the Messiah whom they were waiting for. Those who knew the Hebrew Scriptures would have easily recognised the allusions to prophetic ideas and words in such narratives.

Just before the scene of today's text we read that the crowds brought the lame, the blind and the dumb to Jesus and he healed them. And the people "saw the dumb speaking, the maimed

whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel.” Contemporary Jews of the 1st century in Israel hearing or reading such a text would immediately recall other texts from the book of Isaiah and they would understand that those who told and wrote down such stories claimed that the time of salvation had come and that Jesus is the Messiah.

And others, who in direct encounter with Jesus were healed or saw with their own eyes that people who were lame or blind or dumb began to walk, to see and to speak, began to ask themselves whether this is the Messiah whom they saw healing people and whom they heard preaching in an astonishing way. Is he the one whom they were waiting for? Or should they wait for somebody else? This was a question of survival for them.

The exciting question which bothered the people was not whether it is possible to heal people or to feed a considerable crowd with a little bread and a few fish, rather it was the question whether Jesus is the Messiah which upset them. It was not primarily about the wonders; rather it was about what they meant and how they should be understood. Did they reveal Jesus as the Messiah or were they just miracles that others also could perform?

The answers to this question divided the believers. That Jesus should be the Messiah was and is not acceptable for Jews. And Christians lamentably soon forgot that Jesus, whom they confess to be the Messiah, was a Jew and that he loved the people including those who did not follow him. It is a tragedy that those who believe in Jesus as the Messiah turned in hatred against those who still wait for the Messiah. It is a tragedy that the Christian confession that Jesus is the Messiah was used as a sometimes deadly weapon against the Jews. This is the terrible guilt of the Church for which we have to pray for forgiveness.

The narratives of the New Testament which depict Jesus as the fulfilment of the messianic hopes and promises of the Prophets of Israel show him as compassionate, as a person who puts himself into the position of people in misery in order to overcome their plight. If we take this seriously we will not misuse the confession that Jesus is the Messiah as a weapon against others, rather we will follow his example and practice compassion through empowering the needy.

Amen.