

## **Sermon on Mark 12, 28-34 Hannover International Worship 19<sup>th</sup> October 2014**

Pastor Dr Julia Helmke, Haus kirchlicher Dienste, Hannover

*Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus*

*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen*

„The people are fed up with the over-complex structures of present day societies, they want simple explanations, clear orientation even and especially in their religion and faith. And hate seems to be easier than love.” These are some simplified views one can hear and read today quite regularly in analysing the world situation and the attraction especially for younger people of fundamentalist, terroristic organisations that use religion for their actions and self-understanding. And it is often a reproach to Christians, and especially to the Protestants among the Christians, that they have no clear guidelines, that they are too open and do not give plain advice on how to live and how to distinguish. But regarding the gospel for today one can just state: take a closer look, because it is not true.

The gospel of today is one of the most important paragraphs in the Bible, we just heard in the interpretation of Saint Mark the oldest of the four Evangelists but St. Matthew, St. Luke and St. John (the watchword for the week) tell it in a similar way and they are all deeply rooted in the Thorah, the Old Testament.

I would invite you to take a closer look at the short and apparently simple dialogue between Jesus and this teacher of the law, which I would translate/interpret as „God seeker“:

The background of the dialogue is a discussion that started already in the times of Jesus on earth but intensified in the years of early Christianity. Can one believe in God although he or she doesn't know all the existing rules and commandments or is the knowledge and strict observance of certain rules the pre-condition for belonging to God and to the faith community? And it is then possible to choose out of all these commandments one and to declare it as the one and most important (and in the Jewish context that was much more than the 10 commandments, but altogether 248 commandments and 365 interdictions)

Jesus says: Yes, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

And he adds immediately: Love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.

What do I hear, what do I understand from the answer of Jesus:

1. The connection to God, the belief in God, the relation between God and mankind is nothing theoretical, it takes my heart, my soul, my mind and my strength. This is demanding and relieving at the same time. Demanding because it really means as a whole being: you cannot be just a part-time Christian, a Sunday Christian. And relieving because sometimes one part of us is just more open than the other and each of the named parts of us are equally important. As an example: Sometimes I just feel my gratitude to be alive and a child of God by walking in God's wonderful creation, just these past wonderful autumn days here in the Eilrenriede. There is no strength necessary nor mighty thinking, just an open heart and soul. Sometimes I have to interrogate myself where I rely on a belief - in God or the monthly income, the different insurances that cover my life? Sometimes it is necessary to focus on the soul, aka my inner compass and to give the soul enough space to unfold and to breathe in silence in order to be able to love. And if I exhaust or isolate my mind or my body or my heart too much then it is going to be difficult.

2. And what it is that we shall do: To love God. The original Greek word Saint Mark uses is „agapein“. It is the same word used for the love of God and for God and the love for the neighbour and for myself. Some of you may know the tradition of the agape meal. It is nowadays rediscovered as Holy Meal in our parishes. It is a different form from and for the Holy Eucharist. In early Christianity it was practised as a real meal where the rich and the poor, the free citizens and the slaves, sat together and shared everything, food and words and respect and visions. As a token of the godly kingdom, where we are all symbolically the body of Christ.

A meal where we are fed and nurtured by God's love for us and our love to God, to the one next to us and ourselves. So „agapein“/ to love, means: a friendly love, to be aware of needs of the others, aware of the poverty and richness, even abundance, that is present in every one of us, agapein includes the others. To give and to receive that love. So when we read and hear the commandment „to love God“ - this kind of agape, of love, is not an exclusive love that negates others and it never implicates hatred - hate of others in the name of God.

Because it is through the love we give and receive here on earth we fulfil Jesus Christ's commandment and

it is through the unconditional love God grants us from the very beginning that we are able to love others and ourselves.

3. Until now the dialogue between Jesus and the teacher/ savant/God seeker was just a short Q & A, question and answer session. But now something important happens: the man who has listened to the firm and plain answer of Jesus, an answer which is just perfect, repeats the answer, so that the godly words may become his own human ones. He incorporates the commandment of love and he repeats it not just word for word but in his own understanding and interpretation. What can we learn from that dialogue: It is important to listen to God's commandment very carefully and then to answer to it, to fulfil it with my own words, biography, my own limitations doubts and needs. Actually very protestant! Back to the roots, to the Holy Scripture, the word of God and from there and connected with it free to interpret the way that is possible for me, only bound by my own conscience.

Personally I have literally experienced the process of repetition from something great in my own poor words just last week: I am taking language lessons to brush up my Spanish and we were reading a chapter of Spanish literature. Fine, I was reading it, trying to pronounce it correctly and I felt almost fluent and capable but then I was asked to make a summary in my own words and suddenly I had hardly any vocabulary available and was muttering simplistic sentences. What a sobering effect! I was disillusioned but on the other hand it was helpful: I realized there is still a long way to go but I started to walk on it.

Dear brother and sisters: I think this is what a Christian life is about (and connects us with our Jewish brothers and sisters): We will never accomplish this commandment fully: To love God with all our strength, mind, soul, heart all the time and everywhere and our neighbour and ourselves all the time. But one has to start, every day again. Have it in mind, long for this love, taking it as orientation, guideline. It is a lifelong process of learning, but Jesus approves it: In the end he says: „This man is not far away from the kingdom of God“– by the way, this is the only time in the New Testament he gives that kind of prophecy to someone.

But following this first and most important commandment what does it say about all the difficult and complex issues of our times, (especially ethical topics like stepping in or out in the situations of global war and threats on the borders of life and death, the drama of refugees and global warming etc.)? St. Augustin, the great church father from the 4th Century, summarised this paragraph of the gospel, and in fact the whole task of a Christian life, in a simple and profound piece of advice: Love and then all the rest will follow.

But are we able with all our limitations to approach this task of love? Let us take at the end a look at the first book of the Bible, Genesis, at our first reading: What is the very first description and discernment of a human being? Even before being defined as man or woman. God created man in his own image and likeness. We are living images of God. Reflecting God's love. So simple and yet challenging. Hannah Arendt, the famous Jewish German philosopher, said that hatred, that evil is never radical, just love is radical. That means love is really profound and goes deep down to the radix, the roots and is rooted in God.

So let us be radical, living images of God and be co-workers for a world that needs that commandment of love.

Amen.

*And as blessing: I wish you with the words of an old Celtic blessing the awareness and the presence of God*

*God to enfold me,  
God to surround me,  
God in my speaking,  
God in my thinking.*

*God in my sleeping,  
God in my waking,  
God in my watching,  
God in my hoping.*

*God in my life,  
God in my lips,  
God in my soul,  
God in my heart.*

*So go now and live*