

John 15:18 – 16:4a

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Petri Church, Hannover International Worship

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If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But all this they will do to you on my account, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin.

He who hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It is to fulfil the word that is written in their law, ‘They hated me without a cause.’

But when the Counsellor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning.

I have said all this to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you of them.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The Gospel for this Sunday is a difficult text. It does not propagate wellness spirituality. The text from the Gospel of St. John is not about fair-weather faith; it prepares the readers for difficult times. They may have to face hate and even death; and the text makes them aware that they shall lose their religious home. It prepares the addressees for a kind of new Exodus, they will be on their own and they will meet rejection. But the text also contains a promise. The spirit of truth will come to support them.

This is a disturbing message and may not suit our expectations when we are assembled here on a Sunday morning for our spiritual edification. However, this was a realistic message at the end of the 1st century. The early Christians experienced hate and expulsion from the synagogues which meant separation from their Jewish roots. And there was also the beginning persecution from the Roman authorities. The situation was disturbing and threatening for the early congregations.

Our text gives us a clue about its intention. In the context of the 1st century the passage was composed as part of a long farewell speech of Jesus to his disciples in order to *keep you from falling away*. ... *I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you of them*. In other words, the intention of this passage is to prepare the followers of Jesus Christ for the reality of the world. In the world they experience hate. They should know this that they may not fall away. Their life is life outside the mainstream and they will have to live outside their original religious home: *They will put you out of the synagogues*. You are not of the world. In order to find out what this text means we have to get involved in its theological main argument.

Our text is a warning about hate for Christians: *the world hates you*. At first sight this seems to be hardly relevant for us living in the 21st century in Europe in a relatively peaceful and secure

continent with constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion. Apart from a few hard-core atheists and cabaret artists, who attack the church and occasionally like to make fun of the Christian faith, we do not really face rejection. Rather, the reality in our parts is that the Christian faith is widely ignored. On the one hand people may be interested in all kinds of religions and pseudo-religions, but on the other hand they mostly have no idea what Christianity is about. And they are not even interested to know. This applies to the cultured despisers of Christianity as well.

Is the text irrelevant for us who live relatively undisturbed? By no means! We should realize that our comfortable situation here in Hannover does not correspond to the reality of large numbers of Christians worldwide. Not only in the first centuries were Christians subject to persecution. The 20th century saw by far the largest persecutions of Christians beginning with the genocide among the Christian Armenians. And presently Christians are facing hate in many countries. Sometimes Churches are attacked and burnt down; sometimes people are killed just because they are Christians. We especially think of Christians in Syria and Iraq who are threatened by the IS. But also in Nigeria, Pakistan, Indonesia and other countries Christians become victims of violence because of their faith. *The world hates you* was not only a reality in a distant past applying to the first Christians, it is a reality today. How do we react to this reality? Do we ignore it? Do we suppress the reality of persecution? What can we do? At least we can pray in our worship services for sisters and brothers in Christ who face hate and persecution. We should not underestimate the power of prayer for we have the promise that God hears our prayers. And we can welcome our sisters and brothers in Christ when they arrive here as refugees. This text widens our outlook and helps us to become realistic as well as sensible with regard to the worldwide church and the situation of Christians in other parts of the world.

Through the reflection on the reality of hate and persecution of Christians today we are drawn into theological considerations about the root cause of hate and persecution. The close relationship with Jesus Christ is given as the reason for hate and rejection. *The world has hated me before it hated you and what they do to you they do to you on my account.* Obviously a distinction is made between the *world* and those whom the text addresses. The addressees do not belong to the world; they are addressed as being not *of the world* but as chosen *out of the world*. In the Gospel of St. John the *world* is the world of humans which denies its creator. The Greek word for world in this passage is **ko,smoj** [cosmos] which actually means *orderly, good and beautiful* world. But the world has forgotten that it is orderly and beautiful because it has forgotten its creator who made it good and beautiful. The world rejects God. Because the world wants to be autonomous and self-sufficient it lost its beauty. The world became darkness because it has not understood the light which shines in the darkness. The world in this sense has separated itself from its origin, i.e. from God and therefore it is doomed to death; at the same time the world rejects him who came into the world in order to bring life. The world hates Christ who came to save the world, who came to liberate humans from the pseudo-reality of this world to the true reality of the world as God's good and beautiful world. *He who hates me hates my Father also,* says Christ in our text thus claiming that he and the father are one.

The early addressees of the text – as well as we, who read it now – become objects of the hate of the world because of the unity with Christ. The world hates the followers of Christ as it hates him. *If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also.* Christ is one with God and his followers are united with him. This is why the world hates them. And this is why they can be qualified as people who are not *of the world* even though they live in the world.

The intention of this passage is not only to destroy the illusions of wellness spirituality; rather the intention is to strengthen the faith and to prepare Christians to stand firmly as witnesses to Christ. And this means that they confess him as the one who reveals God who has sent him into the world to save it. To save the world means to liberate it from the untruthful self-understanding that it is autonomous and self-sufficient. The mission of Christians is to bear witness to the mission of Christ. And therefore Christians will share the fate of Christ. They will be able to do so not out of their own strength but because they will receive the *Counsellor*, the *spirit of truth* who

proceeds from God and who inspires and enables them to be witnesses. The coming of the Spirit of truth is the great promise given to us.

The passage from the Gospel of St. John makes us think about our role as witnesses. What kind of witness do we owe the world? It is not that we should separate ourselves from the world. An escape from the world is not what the text suggests. Rather it emphasizes that we have a mission to the world. We are witnesses. Our mission is to help the world understand and accept that it is an orderly, good and beautiful creation of God. We are in the world not to flee from it and also not to go simply with the mainstream. It belongs to the Christian mission to the world to respond to hate with love.

The world of today is characterized by overestimation of its abilities. On the one hand humans claim control over nature and even over life and death as their right. Some believe that we can solve all our problems through scientific and technological progress. On the other hand there are people who only see the destructive potential of science and technology and who are afraid that humankind destroys itself. Both attitudes seem to see the world exclusively in the hands of humans. Both attitudes in fact overestimate the positive as well as the negative power of humans. The Christian mission is to raise objections against overestimation of human power. Humans are not the masters of the world; the world is and remains to be God's creation.

Our Mission to the world is a liberating mission. If humans understand that they are not masters of the world, that they are not at the centre of the world and that they are mortal, they will be free to live in world and to shape the world within the limits set to them. In the moment we can accept our position as creatures of God who owe their existence to him, we are free to live without fear and we are free from the burden to control everything.

This text as well as the entire Gospel of St. John is written to encourage people who through difficulties and persecution have become frightened and full of fear. The Gospel gives us a clue about its intention in the 20th chapter: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.*

Amen