

Sermon at Hannover International Worship

20th September 2015

Genesis 4.1-16a (Cain and Abel)

Luke 10.25-37 (The Good Samaritan)

by Pastor Ulrich Noetzel

Brothers and sisters,

just after midnight, I came back from Istanbul. We visited this exciting city with a group of ministers from Soltau.

In Istanbul Europe and Asia meet. It is a place steeped in history and it is also a place where believers of the three Abrahamic faiths have been living together for centuries.

You can hardly find a better place for a study trip for ministers!

On Tuesday, our first full day, we met Ishak, an imam at the Blue Mosque. He told us about his faith, about the necessity to pray five times a day and what observances you have to keep for the prayer to be valid.

On Wednesday, Rabbi Navi from the synagogue in Ortaköy told us about Jewish life in Turkey. After that we went to the German Protestant Church to hear about their parish life.

Again another faith, another way to worship God.

On Thursday we attended the evening prayers at the Ecumenical Patriarchate. A traditional orthodox vespers sung in ancient Greek and with a lot of incense. The only words I understood were „Kyrie eleison“ – Lord, have mercy...

During this prayer the muezzin of the mosque next door suddenly started singing, calling his congregation to the afternoon prayer.

It was one of these moments when you cannot escape the fact that there are different religions, different ways of worshipping God.

And we realize and have to accept that some of these forms are incompatible, or at least incomprehensible.

We have to acknowledge that we are different. Only then we can start to talk and try to understand each other.

But when we recognize that we are different, and our ways of worshipping are different – yet we claim to worship the true God...

Then we have a problem: we have to answer the question: who is right?

Whose worship is the right form of worship to the true God?

Or could there be more than one truth?

Today's readings have two things in common. They all deal with the question of how to treat your brother.

And also they are about how to worship in the right way.

It seems as if these two things are closely linked – and there probably lies the answer to the question.

a) Cain and Abel

It is a really unfair story: Abel is a shepherd, he has got animals at his disposal and can offer God from his stock, Cain is a crop farmer who can only offer cereals. And what do we read?: „the LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour.“

Is this fair? Why? Does Cain offer the wrong things?

The resulting fratricide could be counted as the beginning of religious wars. The question of the right way of worship lies at

the heart of this story. What is the best offering to God. Meat or vegetarian? We don't learn anything of God's reasons for his choice.

So the question remains – what is the best way or the right way of worshipping God?

There are so many possibilities. – In Istanbul I have seen some of them: praying five times a day, kneeling, bowing, standing.

And you can add your own options:

Incense – holy water – speaking in tongues – Prayer book – Iona liturgy – Lutheran – free prayers – ancient hymns – modern choruses.

You can complete this list. And then you could retell the story of Cain and Abel in a modern version:

One way of worshipping is acceptable to God.

The other one isn't.

May I invite you to do this mental exercise: Put yourself in the position of Abel in this story with your preferred way of worshipping God.

When you are finished – reverse the roles. What was acceptable in the first version, now becomes not accepted and vice versa.

We don't understand and we cannot say why or if one way of worshipping is more acceptable to God than another. The story of Cain and Abel makes no attempt in explaining the religious issues. (Only later in the Bible, chapter after chapter in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, the establishment of the right cult at the Temple will be explained – but it doesn't help us today. It is not our way of worshipping God.).

The religious issues are almost non-existent in this story. The main point is God's interjection, his warning to Cain: „Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.“

We may not understand how other people worship God. It may even make us angry. Or it may make us jealous, because they can do things that we can't (some people can speak in tongues – I can't;).

Other churches may be more successful. They are better at fundraising, mission, healing...

Other religions may be more successful in converting people. Or I may be angry even about somebody in my own church, because of their actions or something they have said.

Hopefully, we don't go out to kill somebody else, because they worship differently. But there are a lot of places where this happens. People are killed because of their religious affiliations. And not only in third world countries and in other faiths. The message for us is:

„If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? Sin desires to have you, but you must master it.“

It is almost as if this story told like a government health warning at the beginning of the Old Testament: „Do not kill each other over issues of worship. Do what is right!“ –

Which brings us to the other story:

b) The Good Samaritan

This is one of the most famous parables of Jesus. Before this story Jesus deals with our question: which way is the right way

to worship God – „What shall I do to inherit eternal life?“ –

Jesus answer: „Love God and love your neighbour.“

This leads to the next question and answer:

Who is my neighbour? The one who takes care of me.

Today I want to have a brief look at the religious background of this story. The main protagonist is a Samaritan. Samaritans were despised by Jews in Jesus time and before. Scholars today would say that they represent a very old form and branch of Judaism.

They have the Torah as their holy books, but not the prophets and other writings. They have their own priests and for a while they had their own temple in Samaria – until it was destroyed.

We hear of them for the first time in the books of Esra and Nehemia, when people from the north want to help rebuild Jerusalem and the temple but are rejected for having married foreign women, and adhering to other cults.

The hero in our parable of the good Samaritan comes from this sister religion of Judaism. He is the one who helps the poor victim of the roadside robbery.

But he is not the first one to pass. A priest and a Levite have also seen him. They are professional religious people in Judaism. By

religious affiliation, they are much closer to the half-dead man at the roadside. Yet they do nothing.

It has been said that they have good religious reasons for not helping the man. Touching blood, or even touching a dead body would make them ritually unclean. It would mean that they couldn't perform their religious duties. They couldn't do their job.

It is not spelled out, but it might be that their thinking was that they could not help this poor man because of their service to God.

And it has to be marked that they are not condemned by Jesus for their inaction. It is merely stated.

Fortunately, this is just a story told by Jesus to illustrate a point. Nobody dies. But almost.

You could call it 'religious neglect'. Normal human behaviour is suspended because of religious duties.

So – What is the right way to worship God?

The whole Bible traces the attempts to answer this question. Starting with Cain and Able. Then the setting up of temple

worship at mount Sinai, the criticism of the prophets. And many many steps in between.

What is the right way to worship God? This question has been asked again and again.

And different answers have emerged through the ages.

I don't think that you can establish a firm set of rules of how to conduct Sunday worship from the Bible.

It can be very free – or it can be based on many traditional words.

Whichever form it takes, whether it is valid and true worship, will be decided on the way in which we treat our brother and sister and our neighbour, outside the church, after the service.

Will we kill him, like Cain? Or ignore them like the Priest or Levite? Let him die at the roadside?

Or are we going to help him like a Samaritan, or even set up a structure within our church to enable them to live with us as one Church.

It does not matter, what words we use in church, how many sacraments we have, what symbolic actions we perform, as long as our lives reflect the love which God has for us, and which we celebrate in our services.

Do what is right! says God to Cain.

Yesterday, our group visited the Church of St George in Pera / Beyoglu. Since the first Gulf War they have a special ministry to the refugees. –

Many thousands of refugees from the countries of the Near East end up on the streets of Istanbul. First it was the Chaldean Christians from the south of Iraq, now it is Syrians. Most of the two million Syrian refugees are helped by the Turkish government, but there are always some who are not cared for by anybody.

These are the people whom they help: The ones who end up on the roadside, ignored by all others, people half dead.

Together with Christians from other churches of all denominations they give food, they give clothes, they pay for hospital treatment, they listen, they help.

And they don't look at their religion.

They are the good Samaritan to these people.

And working together they also cross church boundaries: protestant, catholic, orthodox, western, eastern, evangelical, charismatic, high-church: all working together.

This might be a step towards the true religion. Are we there yet?
No.

We live in a world of contradictions: We live in a world of injustice.

The lady who told us about the refugee help in Istanbul said that for her the greatest challenge was:

That we ourselves live in relative abundance, but our help to the refugees can only be fragmentary.

She told us an example:

She might not be able to fulfil a request for a little money, because their rules only allow a certain amount per family per quarter.

But then she might spend the same amount (or more) that same day herself.

She said: „The challenge is to not look away, but to endure the pain of these contradictions.“

The Priest and the Levite in the parable could not live with the contradictions of a pure life and a needy world.

They had to look away to keep their integrity and purity but thus they failed the needy world around them.

We do not know what equipped the Samaritan to do what was necessary. But he found a pragmatic way of helping the half-dead man without giving himself or his life up.

He leaves the man at an hotel and he goes away to whatever business he was on. But he makes sure the care continues: „Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.“ (Lk 10.35)

This may be a long way from the true religion, the right kind of worship.

But it is the right kind of action.

For the man on the roadside, for the needy, for the refugee – this is the only thing that counts.

Amen.