

Sermon by Pastor Joachim Lau, Hannover
November 15 2015

Dear sisters and brothers,

“Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott” (A safe stronghold our God is still) must be Luther’s best known hymn. It has had an enormous impact. I would very much like to know what feelings this hymn brings out in you. For many Protestants, this hymn is an essential part of the Reformation celebrations. At first glance, it looks like a battle song.

Luther’s starting point was Psalm 46.
we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, ...

Who can claim such a thing for themselves?

Many biblical texts seem to demand too much of us.
The young man who should give everything away;
the disciples who are called upon to leave their parents, wives and children; Jesus saying he did not come to spread peace but rather the sword.
For most of us, such words are too much.

If we were to take only those parts of the Bible that we can understand or live up to, then we would have to cut rather a lot out of it.

But: The scriptures give space for belief.

They take us as we are, with our weaknesses and doubt.
It is not we who live up to the standards of the Bible, but rather the Bible shows us that God is responsible for our lives and accompanies us through our lives.
God is our hope and strength.

„A safe stronghold our God is still“.
In the German words we find a fortress as a central image.

In Luther’s hymn, hope and strength become a solid fortress. Martin Luther wrote the hymn in 1527 or 1528, at a point in his life when he was surrounded by serious illness and suffered depression.

Luther was living in Wittenberg when the Plague caused the university to be temporarily relocated to Jena.
He was shaken by the news of the violent deaths of Protestant converts, including young pastors who had studied under him.

It seemed that powerful evil had been let loose; the peaceful progression of the Gospel seemed to have stalled and was in danger of failing.

It was not a triumphant and self-confident Luther who composed the hymn “A safe stronghold our God is still”, but rather a bent and fearful man living in a town threatened by the Black Death.

Seen against the background in which the hymn was composed, the image of a fortress looks rather different from what one might otherwise suppose.

It is not a fortress standing defiant and strong in which we bravely fight off the foes of an evil world.

No, Luther used the image of a fortress as one in whose shadow those living outside its walls could live in peace.

The singer is not sitting inside the secure fortress, observing the suffering outside its walls. He is sitting amongst the people who are confronted with challenges on a daily basis and who would be entirely defenceless without the fortress.

It is the image of a sanctuary, somewhere for the people to flee to when threatened. One cannot help but think of Luther's stay in the Wartburg, where he was placed in protective custody by the secular lord of his land.

God is like that fortress – an expression of faith. Behind it is the experience of protection and deliverance.

Is that our experience?

Have we experienced deliverance? Have we experienced protection against threats?

Perhaps it would make sense to look at our lives, not in the light of its threats, but rather of its deliverance.

May belief in the living God permit us to focus on our deliverance. Belief is a change of perspective.

Whoever believes themselves held by God, can tackle that which scares them.

Luther had terrible fears. The ancient enemy was a very threatening reality for him. Behind this enemy is the image of the devil, of Satan. The devil is an image for everything that contradicts the Will of God. It is a picture for everything that threatens and destroys life.

The terms that Luther uses for evil may have become strange to us.

But looking at the terrible terror in Paris two days ago, the image of the devil makes sense - we face inhuman evil.

We all know very well that threats to life have become more universal than in Luther's time, if not greater or more gruesome.

The hymn, "A safe stronghold our God is still" is not a battle song, and certainly not a call for inter-denominational strife.

The composer is a burdened, doubting person who nonetheless reminds us that the power of evil has been broken, and that God is life-affirming.

Luther is saying,

"When you are particularly afraid,

when you don't know what to do,
 when you are out of options,
 when you have the feeling that all about you is collapsing,
 then remember that God is on your side.
 Threats and danger are not the last word;
 our life, with all its dark sides, is only temporary."

Luther's song points to the central tenet of Christian belief.

Today we approach this core in a different way.

A new spirit is freeing us of the fear that is threatening to paralyse our society.
 The challenge is not so much to secure the continued existence of our Church; far more, it is to give space in our world for God.

Let us not simply accept violence against people.
 Let us not make peace with the ever-increasing gap between rich and poor nor with the fact that people are being denied the basic minimum necessary to live.
 Let us look to what is happening across the world, not only here at home.

Something of this spirit has been palpable these past weeks. When countless people help refugees – "suddenly there is a spirit of solidarity and freedom that we could scarcely have hoped for."

Yes, there is xenophobia and hatred of the other, too.
 But the Christian culture of welcome and mercy that has also shaped our continent is both audible and visible across all of Europe.

When we follow God and God's passion and compassion for us people, then we develop our own passion for our fellow humans. That is what Jesus Christ stands for.

We need to take seriously our responsibility for our own wellbeing, our own life, and our own belief.
 Only by taking our own responsibilities seriously can we help others. That includes facing our fears.

So Luther has us sing "we lay it not to heart so sore" - that we are "not so terribly afraid."
 It is not about unshakeable belief, not about inhuman fearlessness.
 It is about the willingness to face one's fears and terror.
 It is about refusing to give power over our lives to the threats we face.

If I can live life protected and held in God's hand, then I can break through my fears to do Jesus's work, do God's work;
 that is, to work against inhuman evil.
 That is to work for peace and justice.

Amen

We shall now hear Max Reger's Fantasy for Organ on the Hymn, "A safe stronghold our God is still".