

Hannover International Worship

January 17, 2016

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2. Corinthians 4: 6-10

6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;

9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

What a text, this scripture reading from Second Corinthians!

"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair."

Is that something you could say for yourself just like that? I don't think I could.

Yes, I must admit that I do have a bit of a hard time singing a verse like the one the guitar group sang just a moment ago:

"And when this cup you give is filled to brimming with bitter suffering hard to understand; We take it thankfully and without trembling out of so good and so beloved a hand."

Well, yes, someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *he* could say that kind of thing. *He* didn't lose courage even on the Nazi death row where he wrote this poem, all the while expecting them to murder him.

But me?

Of course I would tremble!

And certainly I would not take the cup of suffering

"thankfully".

Really, I shouldn't be singing this verse.

And the rhythmic, almost waltz-like tune of composer

Siegfried Fietz doesn't exactly help.

Yeah, someone like Martin Luther King, *he* could say that kind of thing.

He risked his life, and eventually paid with his life for standing up for the rights of black people and for reconciliation. And even though he risked his life, he could sing with them *"We shall overcome some day, oh, I do believe that we shall overcome some day."*

And just like Saint Paul he speaks of not being afraid:

"We are not afraid today", and in *this* verse it's not "some day" like in the others, it's "today": "We are not afraid *today*."

Not afraid TODAY?

Do we have the steadfastness of a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of a Martin Luther King, of a St. Paul?

All three of them eventually paid with their lives for their faith. Would I have the strength to be as fearless as they were?

Well, you might say, we are not Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King or St. Paul. Fortunately.

We do not live in a situation of distress and oppression like them. We live in a country with religious freedom. Nobody is going to threaten us with death if we confess our faith.

Thank God, we can only say, and we can say that in a very literal sense. We can live our faith free from oppression.

Can we, really?

Or are there other things that threaten us in a much more subtle way – in a way that is just as dangerous because it is so inconspicuous?

There is the calm everyday life, no need, no oppression, no necessity of thinking of God. Nothing more serious to think of than how I can make life even more comfortable for myself, and where I am going to spend my next vacation.

An everyday life in which I have settled down and made myself comfortable. A life that is good on the outside, a life that makes me drowsy and indifferent.

A life that God is no part of.

And no feeling of suffering or distress to warn us!

Yet, there are these subtle, inconspicuous things.

I am sure many of you do know that pitying look from your neighbor when he meets you leaving for church, as he is on his way to the bakery to get fresh rolls for a late family breakfast.

I am sure many of you have seen that colleague at work shake his head if once you do bring up the courage to let your faith shine through at some point.

I am sure many of you have heard those stupid remarks "Oh, those who run to church all the time aren't any better".

And every single time when I hear those remarks, I mean to be prepared with an appropriate answer, and every single time, when they do come, along with a hostile attitude toward church, words fail me.

And once again, the cynics and the scornful seem to have had the last word.

Yes, we do know this inconspicuous kind of oppression in these small hostilities, in ridicule and scornfulness, that we experience in this oh-so-free and tolerant country, more often than not from those same people who loudly demand tolerance from us Christians.

Of course the kinds of distress and oppression we experience are very different from those of St. Paul or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King. Possibly we feel that what we experience is ridiculously insignificant compared to what they went through.

And yet, we are confronted with the same question they were: How can we as Christians remain faithful and true in these forms of hardship, whatever they may be? How can our faith sustain us and carry us through? Is it really worthwhile to be a Christian and to remain a Christian? Is it worthwhile to build our lives on Jesus Christ as the foundation?

Today, what we see is many people expecting religions to show them ways to the so-called "fulfilling life". If possible, in connection with measurable success.

In the "olden days", and in old hymns, we find life on earth depicted as a vale of tears. Needless to say, nobody wants to hear that kind of thing nowadays.

You will even find management training seminars that convey an almost religious experience to lead you on your way to success.

We as Christians are confronted with that kind of expectation, with people wondering, thinking or even saying:

"Christianity is such a weak and fearful faith, nothing that will lead us into a successful and fulfilling life. Why should we seek guidance from that kind of faith?"

And even from within, we hear these kinds of voices:

"Today's church needs powerful sermons and powerful evangelists. Let us celebrate joyfully instead of sitting and whining!"

A motivational coach – a church speaker himself! – even was quoted saying "In church, we can use only the cream of the crop!"

It seems like that's what the Corinthian congregation expected their preachers to be like. They wanted preachers who knew how to present themselves as successful and self-confident, who would preach with powerful words, quite ostentatiously full of God's spirit.

St. Paul did not fit into this picture.

From what we know of him, he was a genius letter writer,

but not a great speaker.

Possibly he even had a speech disorder, a stutter, or some other kind of a disease; we don't know precisely what it was.

We do know however that his sermons were extremely long, with people falling asleep and even falling out of the window from pure boredom.

For this reason, St. Paul was being ridiculed and attacked and put down as incompetent. People kept doubting his credibility as an apostle.

Now what St. Paul does is remind the congregation of how God created earth:

First thing God did on this dark and inhospitable planet was create light.

And St. Paul says: Now, this is like a second creation, God lighting up our lives! Ridding our lives of the darkness and completely renewing us. Lighting up a light in our hearts.

Christians are not always and not automatically successful. Things go wrong. There is suffering and failure and distress and oppression.

St. Paul tells us: Look, this is what Jesus himself experienced. Sure, he too had happy moments in his life,

he had friends, at times he had a large number of followers and a lot of outward success.

Eventually though, by human standards, his life ended in a complete failure.

St. Paul says. "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus".

This is not something that is nice to hear. *We* don't want to hear that we carry death in our body!

And yet, St. Paul says, it is good to hear this.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

What appears to be total failure turns out to be the greatest victory of all, the victory over death itself.

Therefore, St. Paul says, it makes sense that Christians aren't always successful and victorious at first glance.

It makes sense that we are no heroes of faith or incessantly beaming and successful people.

It's o.k. that way, St. Paul says.

Because that way we realize that it wasn't St. Paul and it wasn't Pastor So-And-So who brought light to Corinth and to Hannover, but God.

"Thank God", St. Paul says, "that I am such a weak and unimpressive figure for my opponents to laugh at. Thank God, because nothing could make it clearer that the success of the gospel in Corinth is not my achievement but solely God's doing."

St. Paul sees himself only as God's tool.

That God has entrusted him with the treasure of the gospel, with his light, that he might share it with others. Lighting up other people's lives by sharing the gospel.

What a relief that is. The success of the gospel does not depend on those who proclaim it. Neither on those who do it professionally, as pastors or in other professions of the church, nor on those who do it as "normal" Christians and members of a congregation.

It depends solely on God's power which will be strongest in our weakness.

We have been entrusted with passing on and sharing God's light.

The power to do so is not something we can find in ourselves. As long as *that* is where we look for it, we will only stand in God's way.

I remember a woman who told me of her first visit to her neighbor who had recently lost her husband.

She was very much afraid of this visit.

What should she say? Isn't every word going to be wrong? There isn't anything at all she can really do to ease the pain, is there?

Her throat is tight, and she feels like the words are stuck somewhere deep down.

There she sits, unsure of herself and completely at loss what to say, listening to her neighbor talk.

Should she venture a comforting word?

Or possibly an invitation to church on Sunday?

Or would everything she might say simply be wrong?

Before she leaves, the other woman says,
"Thank you for coming and sitting with me.

That was so helpful."

None of us is St. Paul. None of us is Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King.

We are John Smith or Mary Jones.

What can we do?

St. Paul says: Nothing. By ourselves.

Don't trust in yourselves, trust in God. Let his power work

through your weakness.

Let him use you as a tool. Let his light shine through you.

Like that woman who simply sat with her grieving neighbor. She knew she couldn't rely on her own words.

This is exactly what St. Paul, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King did.

They were not strong and courageous and fearless from their own strength but because they let God's light shine in their lives and through their lives, to lighten up the lives of others.

Amen.

Hymn: We Shall Overcome