

Hannover International Worship
Petri Church Hannover
21st February 2016, Reminiscere
Romans 5, 1-5
Sermon by Dr. Rudolf Ficker

Dear sisters and brothers,

The text for this Sunday leads us immediately into the centre of the Christian faith, at least in its reformatory form. *Justification by faith, by faith alone*, this was Luther's liberating rediscovery of the Gospel as Paul proclaimed it. Let us hear Paul's own words; I read from his letter to the Romans chapter 5, 1-5:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces a tried character, and a tried character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

It often has been pointed out that in the time of Reformation the tormenting question for people was how they could find a merciful God. Does the life one leads correspond to what God requires and expects from humans? How can one escape God's judgement? In order to find a merciful God one had to perform well and to produce good works and in addition to that there was the possibility to collect relics, to go on pilgrimages and to buy indulgence. The access to a merciful God had become a question of human performance, of optimisation of pious life, and of money.

It seems that today most of the people at least in Europe are not tormented by the question of how they could find a merciful God. Good works are still desirable and necessary, but they are not seen as a key opening access to a merciful God. God does not seem to play a role in the life of humans any more; rather he has been replaced by the human self. Today the tormenting question for quite a number of people is how they can enjoy a healthy life, eat healthy food, keep their bodies in good shape and find fulfilment in their work. How can I become perfect and what must I do to achieve this goal?

This changes the motivation for and the purpose of human activities and performance. It also changes the type of good works people do. But it does not change the basic structure of the human attitude. The idea that humans can take control over their lives, that they have to work hard for their success and for a better world and that they indeed can do it, now is directed towards human self-optimisation. We have become self-referential. The world will be better if I feel better. Formerly human effort was directed towards finding a merciful God. But in

any case the effort still is a human effort, an activity carried out by humans who are deeply convinced that that they can do it if they only work hard enough. To be achievement-oriented seems to be an essential element of the human condition. *Yes, we can!* This slogan in fact disguises our inability and at the same time drives us forward to ever higher performance by suggesting that everything is possible for us if only we try hard.

Paul's message denies the concept of *yes, we can* with regard to God. We cannot earn God's mercy by our own effort. We cannot make peace with God. Paul closes the door of human performance. At the same time he opens the door of faith. There is a possibility to gain access to God; there is the possibility of *faith*. By faith we have already peace with God. We cannot and we need not gain access to God and make peace with him through our effort, rather God has already granted access and peace. We can learn from Paul's message that we are not the main actors, it is God who acts. And our activity does not consist in effort and works but in *faith*. Our activity is a subsequent activity by which we respond to God's preceding acts.

Let us think about *faith*. What does Paul mean by faith? What does this mean for humans who in religious matters as well as in secular matters are used to the concept of achievement-orientation? What does it mean for people who have become self-referential?

When Paul speaks about faith, he does not speak about belief in contrast to knowledge. He also does not primarily speak of faith in the sense of confession of faith. Faith in Paul's understanding in the first place is an attitude of life which also can be paraphrased as *trust in God*. Faith means freedom from worries, because we can trust in God. Our world, our lives, our future are in his hands. Even in judgement we are in his merciful hands. We need not worry about tomorrow, about our security, about our supply with the daily needs, about our existence.

Faith does not deny the problems and dangers of life. It does not deny our shortcomings. The world was never a harmless place to live in, and humans were never perfect, neither at the time of Paul nor in our times. At present we are facing numerous challenges and risks. There is plenty of reason to worry: Will I stay healthy? Will I find a job? Will my pension be sufficient? How does the influx of refugees change our society? Will there be more terrorism and crime? Will there be another economic crisis? I there threat of war? Does my life correspond to what is expected from a Christian? There are many more questions and reasons for *angst*. The native speakers of German may think about what it means that the German word *angst* migrated into the English language. Are we Germans masters of *angst*? However that may be, faith is a strong antidote against *angst*.

If we trust in God, the problems will not disappear, but we need not be afraid. A few pages further down in his letter to the Romans Paul explicates in other words what faith means: *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God ... If God is for us, who is against us?* (Romans 8, 28.31) This knowledge, the knowledge of faith, provides the certainty that no problem, no threat, no catastrophe, no shortcoming, no power can ever separate us from God. The knowledge of faith

provides the freedom to live confidently and even cheerfully in the face of a threatening reality. And the knowledge of faith liberates for action. Liberated from *angst* we can with a sober mind address the problems we have to face and we can work for solutions. Faith in God's action gives us strength and courage to become active. Good works do not open the door to God, but they follow from faith in God and his preceding act of salvation.

Faith according to Paul is, as the theologian Rudolf Bultmann said, *the radical renunciation of achievement; it is the obedient subjugation to the path of salvation as it is determined by God. It is the acceptance of the cross.* This was a tremendous challenge to Paul's contemporaries and it is still a tremendous challenge for us: Salvation is achieved by the suffering of Christ and not by human effort. In this regard humans have to be passive. It seems that humans really do not like to be passive, and also the idea that the suffering of Christ and his subsequent resurrection achieves salvation for humanity and the entire creation seems to be a scandal for the Jews and absurdity for the Greeks, as Paul says elsewhere (1 Corinthians 1, 23). The Lenten season is an opportunity to reflect on the connection between suffering and salvation and faith as trustful imitation of Christ.

Faith does not only liberate from *angst*, it also opens up future. We are not stuck in a dead end; we have a future before us. Faith points towards a bright future: *we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God*, says Paul. *Hope* is the dimension of future, which is important in Paul's thinking. Faith without hope would be weak and without prospect.

Hope does not mean vague and optimistic expectations to which humans desperately cling in self-deception. *Hope dies last* goes a saying. Hope in Paul's understanding is of a different quality. Hope is based on experience and knowledge. The Christians Paul has in mind have gone through hard times. They experienced sufferings. Sitting here in the *Petri Kirche* in Hannover sufferings may be far away for us; at least as a congregation we do not experience persecution. But in other parts of the earth Christian sisters and brothers experience suffering and persecution. Among the refugees are also Christians who suffered and escaped from persecution. When Paul speaks of suffering – and only people who have experienced suffering themselves may speak like Paul – he does not complain but he points out what he knows from experience: *suffering produces endurance and endurance produces a tried character and a tried character produces hope.* For Paul hope is the outcome of a process of experience and maturation. And this is no easy process because it involves suffering.

For us who presently live undisturbed it is instructive and encouraging to look at the shining example of deeply religious people who did not give up their hope. The British Journalist Sarah Helm in her book *Ravensbrück. Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* reports about a group of Jehovah's Witnesses in the camp. These women resolutely refused to do any work which could support the military because they were convinced that Christians ought to be pacifists. And these women also refused to renounce their faith. No threat, no severe

punishment, no torture, and not even the promise of release could break their non-violent resistance and their religious conviction.

Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces a tried character and a tried character produces hope. Hope is based on this process of spiritual maturing. And it transcends the limited horizon of our present lives; it aims at the glory of God. Our present life does not exhaust the purpose of our existence. There is more to it and there is more to come, there is a future which already now informs our lives here and now. From the future glory of God falls light on our present life. We need the transcendent perspective of hope because it gives us freedom and liberates us from our self-referential narrowness. Hope is an inspiring power that points forward to the final completion of those who are already justified by faith.

Amen.