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Sermon on Phil. 2, 1 – 11, Palm Sunday, March 20th, 2016

Dear sisters and brothers,

At the entrance of the Holy Week we have prayed the Christ Psalm – or Christ Hymn – from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, which is this year's recommended text for the sermon. It is a very old hymn, a liturgical text, to be sung or prayed. Unfortunately, no original tune is handed over to us!

For our meditation or contemplation, the immediate context should also be taken into consideration. This is why in the second lesson we also heard the verses preceding the Hymn. Thus the lighting is changed. A new spot is switched on. What is the result?

You see, Jewish rabbis or teachers don't teach or explain dogmatics. They teach, discuss and update Halakha – which is the term for living and behaving, leading one's life according to the Torah, according to the will of the Holy One. And, undoubtedly, Paul is one of them.

So this Christ Hymn appears in a particular function. It is not quoted to teach us how to *believe*, but how to *lead our life* - in general and especially within the Christian Community. We shall return to that and now continue with some observations concerning the Hymn.

Of course, it is a masterpiece, a jewel of old. Paul is quoting it; he is not regarded as its author. He only may have added the reference to the cross. The letter to the Philippians has been written between 52 and 54 A.D., so the Hymn must have been composed some time earlier to become known – and quotable! - among the communities of the believers in Jesus, the Messiah.

We meet terms well known from the history of the creation of man and woman in Genesis, ch. 1: "Then God said, Let Us make human beings in Our own image, after Our likeness...". 'Image', in Greek 'morphé' for 'form' or 'shape', Vs. 6, replaces the Hebrew 'zelem': statue, image, form. Later, in Vs. 7, we read about 'human likeness', 'homoiomia' in Greek, which here replaces the Hebrew 'demuth', 'likeness'. Creation of woman and man in God's image is present in this Hymn as well as the resulting concept of man!

Are we surprised hearing of something like pre – existence of Jesus Christ? Well, in Judaism the concept of pre - existence of the Wisdom – Chokmah – was quite common. The first believers in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, Jews, of course, should have known about that. And so the Hymn describes – or, better, paints – a breath-taking movement: "a fall to the lowest imaginable low from a pre-incarnate highest imaginable high", as the Jewish Annotated New Testament puts it.

In its cosmic dimensions this movement in fact is unique. We, however, should not overlook that similar movements frequently are documented in the Hebrew Bible: Prayers of Psalms mourn, confess, tell of falling into the deepest pit and rejoice having been raised through God's mercy; there is Joseph, thrown into a cistern to die, thrown into an Egyptian prison to rot; there are Daniel and his Friends in the fiery furnace, in the lion's den. There is Isaac's binding, there is the Servant of God in Isaiah, and there is Israel itself – in Exile, again and again, and yet brought to life. Even after the Shoah.

Now, next step, let us look at the way this Hymn of a unique way went in history. It tells the basics of Jesus' story and thus formed the core of all Christian Creeds. Around this core amendments spread as Christological discussions in the Early Church blossomed. The text was translated, logically its terms changed in meaning and function. Greek as well as Roman philosophy and terminology left their marks, fuelled fierce discussions concerning the person of Christ, its substance or essence. Dogmatic skyscrapers grew, different ways of interpretation respectively understanding led to divisions of persons and churches.

You remember the first verses of our text? These developments could hardly have been in Paul's intention... Let us look for dogmatic disarmament.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes about his personal circumstances, thanks for support, expresses his love and longing for them, admonishes, gives practical advice, warns against obstructionists, tells about his plans and the wellbeing of his colleagues and co-workers. The purpose of the letter is cultivation of friendship, fellowship, in short: sharing everything. A dogmatic writing? Teaching? Not a bit! What is his intention in quoting this Hymn? In short: the glory of God, the Father. This is the climax. The Hymn was written - or painted! – to extol the obedient servant – remember Isaiah! – whose obedience led to the glory of God the Only and Holy One. Dogmatic always grew from prayer and praise. And when we deconstruct dogmatic, we are led back to the sources: prayer and praise!

Apparently Paul wishes that the believers in Philippi might unfold what God has laid in them by nature, enforced by baptism and the Spirit: Love, affection, consolation, altruism, humility, the new life, the life not according to the principles of the surrounding society. And as he very well knows that his sisters and brothers are forming only a minority, he quotes the Christ Hymn as an image of motivation, as catalyst. Through listening and meditating, through looking and contemplating they – and we! - are to be consoled, motivated, inspired.

Let's look a bit sharper. In which function, to which purpose is Paul quoting this Hymn? Does it present Jesus Christ as a moral, an ethical example? Have in mind, take to heart in yourselves, what you find in Jesus... how are we to understand that? Copy him?

There is this famous book of the medieval theologian and mystic Thomas a Kempis, Thomas von Kempen: *Imitatio Christi*. Imitation of Christ is the English title. In German it is *Nachfolge Christi* – following Christ. It seems to me that imitation in English and *Imitatio* in Latin have a meaning slightly deviating from the German Imitation, *imitieren*. In English as well as in Latin the meaning is also "follow", in German, I think, we are inclined to understand "copy". But copying Christ? This is something impossible. Of course, we are acquainted with "cut", "copy", "paste", "insert" when working on our PC's or notebooks. But "copy" is neither a biblical nor a spiritual term.

About 1936 the Jewish philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin wrote his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (or Reproducibility)". I quote: 'Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.' Then he argues that the "sphere of authenticity is outside the technical" so that the original artwork is independent of the copy, yet through the act of reproduction something is taken from the original by changing its context.

Copying Christ? It is interesting to apply Walter Benjamin's thoughts to our question. No, reproducing Christ is no way. But: following Christ never will take anything from Him; changing the context only will bring Christ in another one, and following Him only will add to His presence in time and space.

We should regard the Christ Hymn as the oldest icon existing. If you wish, a YouTube – icon, because there is movement in it. The theology of the icon holds that not the icon is revered and kissed, but the presence of the Holy behind it. By looking at the icon, by contemplating we become transformed – to follow Him more nearly, to see Him more clearly, to love Him more dearly, as Bishop Richard of Chichester, ab. 1220, prayed (also sung in Godspell!). He lived and died for the glory of God, lives through the glory of God – and so shall we, to the glory of God.

We are following Him as individuals, which again excludes thinking about copying Christ. But thus we even represent Him, individually and as community, His body. "God said; Let us make human beings in our own image, after our likeness". The term "image" (hebr. zelem) in fact meant an image, perhaps a column, representing the ruler in his empire! So we are created, saved and called to be human beings in Christ's likeness, to represent Him – in permanent contemplation of the magnificent icon presented us today and for every day. And the kind of representation, our halakha, is love, affection, consolation, altruism, humility, the new life in a Christ – conscious obedience. Amen.