

Sermon on September 18th 2016, HIW Petri Church

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Text: Romans 11, 33 – 36

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Wow, that’s something!” But what? Well, “wow” is one of the words that are the same in English and German. I must admit I can’t remember when “wow” became part of our every day language. I do, however, remember that it was a completely unknown word when I was a boy. I was all the more surprised to find out that the origin of this word goes as far back as to the 16th century. Seemingly it was first used by the Scottish writer Gavin Douglas. Anyway, “Wow” has become a rather common word even amongst older people. “Wow, how did you do that?”

I am almost certain: If the apostle Paul had lived in our time he would have used “Wow!”, too, instead of “Oh!” But here we are. We can’t just rephrase the bible. So we read: “Oh!” Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out!”

Before we turn to the question what made Paul praise God so effusively I would like to ask what situations there are where we can’t help but be astonished at God’s doings? Perhaps it is when we hold a new born baby in our arms for the first time: “Oh, look at her, isn’t she cute!” Or when we look at the sky in a starry night and are overwhelmed by all the sparkling stars, thus getting a glimpse of the infinity of the universe. A growing number of scientists can’t even resist an almost reverent amazement. They know so much about the processes of the big bang but they still can’t explain what happened in the first millions of a second after it. When asked whether and how God could be thought of in these processes one of the scientists answered: “Yes, it is possible for me to conceive God in this. First and foremost it is the astonishing fact that there is not nothing but that there is something and that so many complicated and still unfathomed processes were initiated which made life possible.” And he resumed: “There is a reality which is much greater than we all can grasp.” This sounds like a confession and I think it was meant to be exactly that. Through becoming astonished our hearts may become open for the revelation of God’s wonders.

Something similar can happen when we try to figure out what Trinity is all about. Over centuries scholars have tried to describe and explain how it can be that there are three in one and what relationship there is between God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Just last week I learned that early Christians in the Coptic church of Ethiopia found a rather simple answer to this question. In the Ethiopian narrative Kebra Nagast which means “The glory of kings” it is told that they all three have existed from the very beginning on. I quote: “Then the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit said: “Let us make man in Our similitude and likeness” and with ready agreement and goodwill They were all of this opinion.” I don’t reject this Trinitarian concept of God, but I must admit I prefer the idea of three separate yet united entities of God: The Father or Mother who created the world and mankind; the Son who is the incarnate word of God to show us how God wants us to see him: loving, concerned, comforting; and the Holy Spirit who like wind blows fresh breezes of life and belief in

peoples' hearts and brings churches together all over the world. Our belief would be poorer without this marvellous Trinitarian God.

In an astonishing way the three different characters of God are especially portrayed in Johann Sebastian Bach's Fugue which we are yet to listen to but has already been indicated in the Prelude. To say it bluntly: If we had not the belief in the Trinitarian God, Bach wouldn't have been able to compose such an astonishing master piece brilliantly interpreted and played by Dietmar Zeretzke. To both the composer and the organist we can only say "Wow!" We must admit we can't fully grasp the belief of a Trinitarian God let alone the sophisticated composition by Bach but we are deeply touched and moved and it fills our hearts.

It must have been similar with the apostle Paul. With his mind he cannot really grasp what he writes about earlier in his letter to the Romans. He himself is pondering over difficult questions, e.g. why there should be no difference between Jew and Gentile who call on the name of the Lord. "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" And even more: How is it possible that the Jew can gain eternal salvation when they deny Christ as God's Son, when they rejected him and nailed him on the cross? Weren't the Jews the chosen people of God? How could God give them such obdurate heart? Isn't this unjust? Will God really save them or not?

To some believers this unfortunately is still a topical question although our church has long ago issued a clear statement against the condemnation of the Jewish people. But there are other questions which often worry us. We all know that there is always another side to the coin. There is on the one side the astounding praise of God and on the other side the fear and trembling at how vulnerable and frail our lives are. Whenever we see or hear about another terrorist attack in Syria, in Iraq, in Nice, Munich or elsewhere we are shocked at pictures of brutality beyond any imagination. "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (Psalm 8, 4). In turbulences we fail to recognize man and God. Where is God when someone we love all of a sudden is hit by a fatal illness or dies in an accident? The whole life is turned upside down. Why me, why him? It is incomprehensible, unfathomable, we are shocked by God's presumed absence, contrary to God's wonders which we marvelled at before.

Let us leave it at that for a moment and turn back to Paul to see how his struggle went on.

In the midst of all his wearing questions out of the blue a great mystery is revealed to him as Paul puts it. The answer to his questions is: God will keep parts of the Jew's hearts obdurate until all Gentiles believe. Then Israel, too, will be saved. That is: first the Gentiles, then the Jews. At Paul's time this meant: all people on earth will be saved. God will prove his mercy and compassion to all people. -

I pause. Can this really be true? To be honest, this goes against the grain, doesn't it? There have got to be differences. There is good and bad. The bible itself mentions these differences e. g. in Matthew 25, where the Son of Man will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. In the same way the Son of Man will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left at the Last Judgement. "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life", that's how the passage ends. Didn't Paul know about this? Is it a big misunderstanding

of his? Well, Paul obviously doesn't understand either. But all of a sudden he is overwhelmed by God's revelation of this mystery which leads him to this astounding praise "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"

How unimaginable are God's ways, are his ways of mercy and compassion. Like at Christmas. Remember? "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." Yes, we admit: We are amazed, year after year. God becomes one of us in this little baby. Later he does not spare him any of our human trials and tribulations. He even suffers death on the cross, but, thank God, overcomes death through his resurrection. Since then it has been revealed to us: There is no suffering, no hardship, not even death without God being at our side through his Son Jesus Christ and through his Holy Spirit, our counsellor. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" – What does this merciful and all-embracing love mean nowadays to us who try to live as Christians whose task it is to prepare the way for the Lord and make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God? One thing is sure: We would not prepare his way if we excluded people who we think don't belong to God. Can we be certain that we will be accepted by him the way we are and live at the cost of others? So let us be careful in our judgement as difficult as this may be at times. Let's remember what Paul writes in the following chapter of his letter to the Romans: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement... If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

We will, however, prepare the way for the Lord by trying not only to believe but also to express through our way of living that God's mercy encompasses everybody. Living in accordance with God's compassion means to recognise that every human being is God's creation, no matter which nation or race or religion he belongs to or which colour of skin he has. Living in accordance with God's compassion also implies that we do not let ourselves be intimidated or doubt God's love when we are in despair ourselves. He will sustain us. Living in accordance with God's compassion finally implies to try and give God honour and praise with our whole life: to be as compassionate as he is, to reduce prejudices, to build up trust and forgiveness, to awaken hope again and again and to ask God for the strength of his Holy Spirit through his Son Jesus Christ, our Lord. What could we do better than to honour and praise God with our whole life and to confirm the message, Johann Sebastian Bach finished many of his works with: Soli Deo Gloria, To God alone be the glory. "For from him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever, Amen." (Romans 11, 36)