

Sermon on Matthew 25, 31- 40 on the occasion of Hannover International Worship at Petri Church, Hannover-Kleefeld, The Last Sunday in the Church Year, October 19, 2023

When the son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...Then the King will say to those on his right: 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, our thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?' (39) When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' Then the King will reply: 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'. Matthew 25, 31-40

Dear brothers and sisters!

According to the Church Year this is neither the last nor the first Sunday in the Church Year. One could think: nothing special. Let's wait and see and let's make the best of it. Like Simon. He is making the best of school. He is eight. My youngest grandson. He loves telling jokes. He says that's best in school sharing the latest jokes with his friends. Like this one: Two ants meet an elephant and say to him: Let's fight! The elephant: No. It's unfair: two against one! Simon likes to tell his jokes in front of a large audience. Some therefore say: He will become a Pastor. His mother says: You and your grandfather are doing the same nonsense.

In a joke **it depends all on the key point**. The same in the parables of Jesus. There is always the risk that the key point will not be understood or missed. A joke is told best if the situation allows it. This is also true in regard to the Jesus parables. They are told by Jesus in a specific situation in which they hit the nail on the head, so to speak. The evangelist Matthew was interested in a controversial discussion with his fellow Jewish people. He himself had become a follower of Jesus and found that the Jewish people have messed up their inheritance. By the way: *Martin Luther* translates „goats and sheep“ with „Böcke und Schafe“. Therefore one might say in German: „Sie haben ihr Erbe verbockte“.

When we look at the word „sheep“ metaphorically and according to Jewish tradition the word **sheep** is related to „God's own people“. The people of Israel is the flock of sheep, guided and sheltered by Jahwe who chose Israel as his people. Now, Jesus, according to Matthew confronts his fellow-believers with the objection: Only those are children of God who are doing His will. Heritage alone is not enough. This was nothing less than a fundamental questioning of traditional faith and identity.

There is a German saying: „Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern, erwirb es, um es zu besitzen!“ This is usually associated with the idea of increasing what is inherited. However, the idea Matthew has in mind is not intended in the category of possession rather than of **sharing**. Could be it is close to the idea of investing in a foundation rather than in increasing your own wealth.

You already may have observed that I try to look at our parable from different perspectives: From the **individual perspective**, of course is always a challenge. Whom are we? Are we the good ones or the bad ones? Spontaneously we might want to say: We feel like we are more or less good. However, who decides about it? When listening to the words of Jesus others may feel caught and guilty. And others again may feel this way or that way.

The **political perspective** could be Ukraine and Gaza. In regard to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Gaza or rather Palestine it is rather complex. You have to go deeper into history in order to avoid superficial consideration and not to just confirm one's own prejudice. However: the brutal and terrible massacre that the Hamas terror organisation committed against innocent people cannot be justified. It must be strongly condemned. Of course Israel does have the right to defend itself and to stop the Hamas terror once and for all. And as well according to international law civilian people must be protected and children, weak or sick people must be taken care of.

When looking back into history things become even more complex. I am afraid that the ongoing conflict can also be traced back to the Jewish conviction: We are God's own people. Jahwe gave us this land. It is promised land. It is holy land. Once something is regarded to be holy than it no longer can be questioned. To Israel it is a matter of identity and a matter of safety. However, to Israel's neighbors it is entitlement and claim. Not to say: conquered land or even stolen land. Fifty years after the so called Six-Days-War in June 1967 a major group of right-wing radical nationalistic people in Israel claim the land west of river Jordan for themselves as Jewish. They call this land *Samaria* and *Judea* and they dream of a state *Great Israel* as it once was in the time of King David and Salomo. The number of right-wing-nationalists in Israel grows quickly. What does this mean in regard to German Politics? Will even then the unconditional support for Israel be valid and given?

Recently in a talkshow the former ambassador of Israel in Germany was confronted with the fact that twentytwo percent of Israel's citizens are of Arab origin. He replied: 'Israel is a Jewish and a democratic state. If this would no longer be the case the existence of Israel would be questioned'. After the horrible Holocaust, the Shoah all over the world Jews are united in this: Never again! After terrible wars in Europe we have learned that a peaceful coexistence is only possible with a willingness to compromise and mutual respect. And we have experienced that it works. This is hopeful, isn't it?

Coming back to the parable in Matthew: What is the key point? Strange enough God is portrayed as a merciless judge. His sentences are clearcut. Either you are goat or sheep. At that time small livestock, goats and sheep often have to be herded together. Especially when you are poor and you only have a small flock. Shepherds are aware that goats and sheep don't really fit together. Goats: assertive, eat whatever they can get. Difficult to tame. Sheep: gentle, they like to have community with others, rather easy to keep together. Jesus is portrayed as the good shepherd. The sheep are listening to his voice. He cares for them when they are lost. Sheep stands in a metaphoric way for the people of Israel. Between Jahwe and Israel is or is supposed to be full relationship harmony.

However, we know that this always been far from reality. The world is full of egomaniacs. And the distribution of wealth in our own country and in other countries is not at all just. But there is a longing for justice and fair distribution of wealth. Every culture has a similar story to remind us of this. If we refuse to share with those who are less fortunate we will be punished in one way or the other.

Is this the key point in our biblical story? Not quite! Of course it is good to help those in need. However, does this determine

whether we go to heaven or to hell? (Whatever our perception of heaven and hell might be). Indeed, I know people who are rather wealthy and donate a lot and they do it regularly. I know people who care for their sick neighbour and keep in touch with those who are suffering. Some of them would say, this is because we are Christians. Others would say: We do it independent of being Christians or even: in spite of not being Christians. In our biblical text people were not even aware of what they are doing good to others. For them it is a natural or human thing to share and to help - without purpose or benefit.

What then is the key point of our biblical text? First we can determine that the parable is simply listing the relevant criteria: to give those who are thirsty to drink, to feed the hungry, to host a stranger, to give clothes to those who needed them, to look after the sick and miserable fellow men, to visit those who are excluded from society or have been excluded because it is their own fault.

What did we do? And what didn't we do? To follow the mentioned criteria is not easy at all. Neither in private life nor in politics. Some military experts are warning: The current wars and world wide conflicts have the potential to trigger a global war. Some historians remind us of the year 1914, when the world stumbled into the catastrophe of the First World War. Many people are scared. Me too. The war in Ukraine that violates international law and aims to subjugate a country brings with it all the horrors of war. Pakistan forces two million Afghanian refugees to leave the country within a short time. A human catastrophe. At the same time two hundred million refugees all over the world are seeking security and well-being for their families. Imagine we were one of them.

Today is the German National Holiday **Volkstrauertag**. It took a long time in Germany to move from an heroic remembrance to mourning. For all the dead and for all the misery of the many million people. Regardless of different national identity all of us are in the first hand human beings, aren't we?

Elie Wiesel the well-known Jewish writer, born in Romania, holocaust survivor, refugee in the USA gives his own interpretation of what happened in the lives of **Cain and Able** in his book „Messengers of God“ in a sense, the two represent the two groups, the goats and the sheep. Cain desperately wants to talk to someone who understands his distance from God. He is longing for his brother Abel to understand him and care for him. But Abel is too busy with his own appreciation for acceptance and love from God. He has no time for his brother. He does not care for him. He is not even interested in him. This is why also he bears responsibility for driving his brother to violence.

Elie Wiesel says, the Cains in the world become what they are because of us. Because we do not have time to listen, to be empathetic, to understand, to care, to reconcile. We are often too busy with ourselves to recognize the rights and the dignity of the others. Too often and too quickly we see the other as our enemy instead of seeing the other as our brother and sister. We go to war too quickly, because we think that bombs can silence alienation rather than approaching the other patiently and appreciatively. Our politicians may assure us and also we may be convinced that fighting is inevitable.

Until February 24, 2022 I considered myself to be fundamentally peace-loving. But then I was shocked at myself when I vehemently advocated that NATO should drive the Russian invaders out of the Ukraine. And now again I am shocked at myself that I believe that the Hamas terror must be fought with all means possible even if there will be many civilian victims. It is not that easy to distinguish between good and evil, isn't it?

The evangelist Luke who put emphasis on the image of the merciful God tells another Jesus parable: The **Parable of the Good Samaritan**. Again, the key-point is when in the end Jesus asks: Who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? And the person Jesus is talking with - an expert in religious law - replies and at the same time questions his entire previous belief system: The one who had mercy on him. A very short and clear answer. **This is the key point: Be merciful.** I would add: also with yourself! Possession, power, reputation is worth nothing in comparison to behaviour like: being merciful, empathetic, friendly, caring.

Each of the Jesus-parables does have its own key point. For instance the **Parable of the merciful father** - or as some say: the parable of the lost son. The merciful father - metaphoric for God - never gives up. I quote: „But when he was yet in a distance his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him...“

Many of the Jesus-parables are about the topic of empathy and mercy. They are written for us. Because it is so difficult for us to be generous, respectful, loving. All too often we fail to be what God has called us to be. But I trust that in the end the merciful father never ceases to reach out to us. I trust that we are loved even when we act in an unlovable way. And we are empowered although we lack the will. We are sent to others even though we are preoccupied with ourselves. And we are offered a land and a future of hope and new beginnings.

Sermon, Hannover International Worship, November 19, 2023

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