

I will give you rest

Sermon

preached on the 6th Sunday after Trinity (July 3), 2005

in the *Christi-Auferstehungs-Kirche*, Karlsruhe

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Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm: 145:8-14; Romans 7:21-8:6; Matthew 11:25-30

Today's gospel reading contains two statements which I find rather startling.

'I bless thee, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children.'

'Come to me, all ye who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.'

Both these words are well known, and both of them put me at some unrest.

Some few weeks ago, the world hailed the new Pope, Benedict XVI. It may remain to be seen whether this election will substantially bring the Church forward in the direction of the goal of visible unity, which is so dear to our hearts; but there can be no doubt that the new Pope is a very learned man, most probably the most learned Pope since at least two and a half centuries. Benedict XIV, who led the Church around the middle of the 18th century and whose name was surprisingly rarely mentioned when the present Pope chose his name, also was very learned and may even equal him.

But now we hear that God has hidden "these things", the things of God about which Jesus speaks, from the learned, and has revealed them to the simple. There will certainly be some people who will use just this word to maintain, that the Pope doesn't know about Christ really. We needn't bother about that

now. But when we look at ourselves: We may not be learned, in divinity I mean, but do we really think we are simple? Our Church at least lays great emphasis on the theological knowledge of its clergy, and not of its clergy only, but of all its members. This provides me with the opportunity to mention that I am just about ordering some volumes of the “New Church’s Teaching Series”, which is especially meant for the theological information of the congregations, and I hope that we will have the opportunity of studying this together some time.

But should we really do this, if God hides his truth from the learned?

The other word is even better known: ‘Come to me, all ye who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.’ I remember that it was printed in golden letters on one wing of the altar of the church which I attended as a child. One of the favourite sayings of Jesus, cherished by generations of Christians, and especially Christian preachers, through the centuries. However – do we labour, and are we overburdened? And if we feel so, do we feel called to come to Jesus to be given rest? It appears to me that most people, and Christians also, who feel overburdened prefer to stay at home on Sunday, to sleep well into the day, and then to go for a walk perhaps; but they apparently do not expect to find the rest they seek with Jesus, in Church. And do not we ourselves sometimes think, “Is it really necessary to get up timely tomorrow and to travel to Karlsruhe for the church service?” That doesn’t sound like expecting rest from the burdens of our everyday life. Does it?

But I think we have just scratched the surface of our text a little bit. If we want to really understand it we have to consider when and where, to whom and about whom Jesus said these words, according to the evangelist.

“The learned and the clever” of whom Jesus speaks are the Pharisees and scribes, those people who knew the holy

Scriptures very well, many of them even by heart. They certainly knew the Scriptures much better than we do. We are made aware of this time and again when we read about the discussions Jesus had with them. They knew what they talked about. And nonetheless – they could not see that Jesus was the Word of God to them, the Symbol of God, as a Jesuit theologian termed it recently, which mediated God’s presence to them. Why this?

I think what Jesus means is that it is not enough to know theoretically what was written in the Law or what the prophets had said in their day. If we knew the Scriptures as well as the Jewish scribes did we would see that it is full of ambiguities, even of contradictions. To give just one example which comes to my mind: In Nehemiah Jewish men are enjoined to dismiss their foreign wives; in the book Ruth it is shown how a Moabite woman got into the genealogy even of King David.

What is necessary to understand the mind of God is, therefore, an actual encounter with him, as the first disciples met him in Jesus, or we today find him in the life of the Church and especially in its sacraments like the Holy Eucharist. Therefore it is not enough just to sit up in the evening and to read the Bible alone, good and profitable as this may be in itself. As the treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia, who sat on his chariot and read the book of the Prophet Isaiah without understanding it, we need the personal witness of a Philip.¹

And this is the point at which I think the little children come into the picture. Little children don’t learn by reading and reasoning in the first line. They learn from persons whom they encounter, and whom they experience to be trustworthy. Therefore, it is so vitally important that parents and other educators are loving and trustworthy. They needn’t know everything; but children must experience them as loving and trustworthy, as firm ground, as rock on which to build.

Likewise believers and the Christian community. The witness of the Christian community, the common life of the Church, is the place where man can encounter God in Jesus Christ. And I think it is not so much the wisdom of our words as the sincerity and mutual affection of us all in our common life as the body of Christ that “prepares the way of the Lord” into people’s hearts. We must appear to be loving and trustworthy in our witness to the love and reliability of God himself.

But, does this not place just a new burden on our shoulders? This brings us to the other word of Jesus we heard in our gospel reading: ‘Come to me, all ye who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.’

Jesus did not come in order to add to our burdens, but to alleviate them for us.

“Unload all your burden on to him,” we read in the 1st Letter of St Peter, “since he is concerned about you.”ⁱ What is translated here as “burden” is the Greek word *me,rimna*, which means: care, concern, anxiety, worry. And therefore, in the NRSV this verse is rendered as “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” “*pa/san th.n me,rimnan u`mw/n*” – “all your anxiety”. So we see it is not the burden of work which makes our bodies tired that is meant here, but the burden of our responsibilities which troubles our minds, which causes us anxiety.

At Jesus’ time, and when St Matthew’s Gospel was written, it was the Mosaic law that caused many people anxiety, and it was those learned and clever people, the Pharisees and scribes, who reinforced this anxiety. But Jesus took it away. “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me.”ⁱⁱⁱ The tax collector in the parable went home justified, and not the Pharisee.^{iv}

The intricacies of Mosaic law are not our concern today, but we have other things to worry about. Did I treat my child in the right way? Did I hurt my partner by negligence? If we are honest to ourselves there is hardly a day that we cannot raise questions like these. We can try always to do our best, but time and again, we fail. We miss the mark. Now, Jesus doesn't invite us to stop trying to do our best; far from it. But he invites us to let what is done be done, and to turn our eyes to the future, and trust in God's love, who is able and willing to grant us a new beginning time and time again, seventy times seven.

'Come to me, all ye who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.' Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Acts 8:26-39.

ⁱⁱ 1Pet 5:7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joh 14:1.

^{iv} Luk 18:14.