

Predigt zum Dreiländergottesdienst am 20. Juni 2010 – in englischer Sprache

Congregation of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

It was after a concert in a prison. I got to play with a band which was hired for the prisoners and next to me was a man playing and singing along as enthusiastically as myself. We played Hotel California, by the Eagles, and the music seemed to be coming from his toes. At first I thought he was with the band, but later I learned that he was serving a life sentence for triple homicide. And the attendant told me: "If you had known that before, would you have still joined the band to play along?"

And to this day, I still do not know the answer to that question. Because how do you deal with people you know did such horrible things? And that is how I view Paul. Imagine him living in the last century. Imagine he had been wrong in the war. What if he had voted for the NSB, NSDAP, BF (political parties during WWII) with full conviction? What if he had turned people in, betrayed them, collected them or even transported them? What do we read in the Bible: after the stoning of Stephen, the first murder after Jesus' execution? On that same day started a fanatical persecution of the Jerusalem congregation, so that all were spread over Judea and Samaria, the apostles excluded.

And a man named Saul, who had also been present at the murder, tried to destroy the congregation by violently taking men and women from their houses and locking them up in prison. He went so far as to ask the High priest for letters of recommendation. With these letters, he could also imprison any man or woman following the teaching not strictly enough on his route to Jerusalem. If anyone was wrong in that first century – wrong but also dangerous, aggressive, violent and fanatical – it was Saul. He was convinced that any deviation from the right teachings was not to be tolerated. He was someone who believed that heretics should be punished severely.

If he had lived in the 16th century, he would have joined the Spanish Inquisition. In the French Revolution, he would have been Jacobean. Under Stalin he would have served the KGB, under Hitler the Gestapo, under Honecker the Stasi. How do you deal with such a past? If you had this on your conscience? If you served the wrong cause? Would you cover it up, keep it a secret? It's easy for me, 'Gnade der Spätgeburt', but for this Saul, it is a heavy burden. As it was for Zacheus, as it is for people today with a guilty past. Saul chose another way. He, meaningfully, changed his name to Paul, the little one. And he chooses radical honesty. In a letter to his colleague Timothy, he writes: "I used to be a blasphemer and a persecutor and violent aggressor". On other occasions he is not shy about revealing his past either.

On the contrary, he mentions it time and time again. Not just because he feels guilty, but to stress the change he has made. You may have heard some conversion stories. Especially in more pious churches, where people would confess to previous addictions to alcohol or drugs, or a promiscuous life. And then all of a sudden they see the light. Or Jesus. Or both. But as Saul, Paul did not lead a promiscuous life, nor was he taking drugs or alcohol. As Saul, Paul was very dutiful, punctual and disciplined. Hard-working, bordering on fanatical. Driven

by his own truth. A truth where deviant minds formed a danger and a threat. An evil to be dealt with at the root of the problem. As Saul, Paul is very much different from Zacheus, who was a lost son. As Saul, Paul is much more like the eldest son who cannot comprehend his father's mercy and is angry about it. The eldest son thinks in systems that categorize people; whereas the father knows that there will always be people who do not fit into the system. And that is why Saul was much more dangerous than Zacheus. And people feared him for good reasons. For he was a man who did not hunt Christians for the bounty, but out of conviction that these people should not exist. Yet it was this man, so convinced of his own right, so stuck in systems, who is literally thrown off the horse and onto the ground. In his own words to Timothy: 'But I have been given mercy because I did that in ignorance and disbelief, and the mercy of our Lord has been great, with the belief in and love for Jesus Christ'. It seems easy to write, and easy to dig up two thousand years later. But do we fully comprehend the struggle that preceded this? Do we appreciate the lows that Saul must have gone through? For in that light that shines on him from heaven, he hears the voice of his victim. He faces the person he has tortured to death. 'I am Jesus, whom you seek'.

And I think: could it be that even an executioner, a Schreibtischmörder, sooner or later meets his victim again? That sooner or later, there will be a confrontation between victim and perpetrator? That sooner or later, the perpetrator can no longer evade his victim, if not here, then in heaven? For Paul, that heaven opens briefly on the road to Damascus. And for him it is not a pretty sight, not by any means. When his victim shows himself, 'I am Jesus, whom you seek', we can read how he rose from the ground and could not see, even though his eyes were open. And he was taken by the hand and led to Damascus. And he could not see for three days and also did not eat or drink during that time. Has Saul been found? No, he has completely lost track. And is losing track not the very thing that precedes being found? Doesn't being found mean, first and foremost, to have completely lost your way? Doesn't being found mean to recognize that you are lost and cannot sink any further? As the youngest son with the pigs. But when will the eldest son realize that? In time to be found, in time to make a radical change?

If Paul has a reason to be thankful, it is exactly that. That he has been found in time. In his own words: it was me who the Lord took mercy on, I was the one he showed his great patience so that I become an example to all who believe in him and will receive the eternal life. But gratitude is not the sole motivation for this text. It is also an example. What he has been through, what he has experienced, serves to clarify this new belief, new faith. Paul's own biography, his own life history, his conversion is an example of the mercy of the Lord. The entire guilty past is now serving the complete surrender that is his. The deeper the low, the more glorious is the mercy. For all have sinned and receive his mercy through the redemption in Jesus Christ. Paul seems to have forgotten one thing though, accidentally or on purpose neglected: one link in the chain of being found. And that link is the moment in no-man's land. Between the two sides. On the one side the priests he no longer belongs to. On the other side the Christians, whom he does not yet fully belong to. In this situation Paul is praying: Mama, take this badge off me, I can't use it anymore. It's getting dark, too dark for me to see I feel like I'm knocking on heaven's door Mama put my guns in the ground I

can't shoot them anymore. That long black cloud is coming' down I feel like I'm knocking on heaven's door. And then someone knocks at the door. And as Paul opens, there is a man standing there shivering. For the man had heard from many about the wrong Paul did to the saints in Jerusalem. And he knew that Paul had letters from the High priests allowing him to imprison all who worshipped Christ. Yet despite all this, his first words were: Saul, brother. Do you know what that means, what it entails, to call someone brother or sister? It means you share the same mother or father, you are connected through family ties. Saul, brother. These words welcome Saul in those circles. He belongs, he is invited to become family. The youngest son greeting the eldest, or the eldest son greets the youngest.

This Ananias has not been described to great lengths in Paul's letters. But this man, who we don't know, is the first to truly find Saul. This man, Ananias, does not respond in the usual way. If someone punches us, threatens us, ... This man, Ananias, does not act according to the scheme, friend or foe, right or wrong. It would have been more logical if Ananias ran away, hiding with the other Damascan Christians for this threat of persecution. But Ananias meets Paul, open and vulnerable. That is the first wonder in the acting of this disciple from Damascus. Such a way of acting is confronting because of the surprise and unexpected. Ananias does not do the expected in this situation. He does not stick to the role model of persecutor and fugitive, lord and servant, master and apprentice, threat and fear, truth and lies. Ananias is a student of Jesus and demonstrates that he has understood His words. Which words: love your enemies, be good to those you hate, bless those you curse, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone hits you in the cheek, offer him the other cheek as well. If you offer someone your upper garment, make sure to offer your undergarment too. Give to all who ask something of you, and do not claim your goods back if someone takes them from you. Is this a new law? No, these are examples of contradictory acting. Acting and reacting in such a way that it throws your opponent off balance. Ananias acts contradictory by calling his greatest enemy brother and placing his hands upon him.

Jesus acted in the same way, when he invited himself to Zacheus: Zacheus, come down, for today I must be in your house. And so people are found who were hopelessly entangled. So people come back into the circle where they were once shunned. And so community is restored where it was once torn. And in that exact same spirit the first three nations service was once held. Perhaps because we know, have learned, what it is to be lost: because we know, we have learned what it is to be found by an Ananias who came on our way. Perhaps because we know, have learned how good it is to belong, to join again. Maybe because we believe and hope and desire to be found in the way that Paul describes: Now we are looking into a foggy mirror, but shortly we will meet face to face. My knowledge is limited now, but shortly I will fully understand, as I am understood. To encounter other human beings in that way, like Ananias in Jesus' footsteps. That is why I think I need to return to that prison. And maybe you should stretch out your hands to someone. For how else will people be found?

Amen.