

Welcome

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” (Ezekiel 36:26)

All vicars have their favourite preaching topics, the two or three key messages we like to repeat, and you might have noticed in the past years that one of my favourite subjects is that our actions and thoughts should not be determined by fear, but by love. Fear is nasty. Fear is the motor for hatred and isolation.

You know what? I am frightened. Fear is creeping over me, and I don't know what is worse: the feeling of fear, or the sources of my fears. The inauguration of the new American President two days ago, who lacks all sense of empathy and solidarity, sent a chill down my spine. Of course there was nothing new about it, we saw the threat coming, the threat to democracy and fundamental human rights. Yet there he was, a man who seems to have a heart of stone, taking over the leadership of the most powerful economy and army in the world. There will be others, too, and many countries in this world have been led by ruthless leaders for decades. Some people say: don't be frightened, it is not 1933 all over again. No it is not 1933, it is 2017, and we simply don't know what the future brings, how it will look, if it will be as bad as some of us think, or if we will get away with it.

These words from the Book of Ezekiel struck a chord with me: “remove from our bodies the heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh”. And today I can but pray to the God of love: give us a heart of flesh, and let our hearts not turn into stone in our fear. Bless us all with your wisdom and honest compassion, and bless this world with beauty.

Reading: David defeats Goliath (1 Samuel 17:33-49)

Sermon

“You are not able” - “Da chasch du doch nöd” How often have we heard this sentence in our lives. “Don't even try, you are too small, too weak, too stupid.” I am sure that you can think of many examples when you have been discouraged in your lives.

A friend recently told me the following: when she was a child, she wanted to be a lawyer. Her mother however told her that she should give up on her ambition because her brother was going to be a lawyer and that her ambition to go down the same path would impact on his performance. Instead, she should become a kindergarten teacher, her mother said. But my friend decided to apply for a place at university without her mother's knowledge. She got in and is a successful lawyer today.

“You are not able to.” This sentence closes so many doors, sets an end to so many ambitions and puts obstacles in our way that don’t need to be there. How much talent has been wasted, how many lives have been put on hold and how many brilliant ideas have never been executed because of these five little words: “you are not able to”.

The message of the Bible is: you are able to. God calls us to live up to our potential, men and women, old and young, native or stranger, wealthy or poor. God calls us to break down the boundaries within ourselves and between us and the others. God calls us to never give up, despite of all the opposition we might meet on our way.

Jesus helped the sick to get back up on their feet. The Gospel of Matthew tells us the following story: *“When Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him. That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick.”*

“The fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him.” This is a very powerful image. We all know how it feels when we have a fever. It is a feeling of complete exhaustion and weakness. When Jesus preached to the people, he used everyday experiences that people could relate to. With this story of Peter’s sick mother-in-law he appeals to our experience of total weakness. He is also reminding us of the feeling we have when, after a fever, we can finally get up and carry on with life. You will rise again, this is the message of Jesus. You will rise again, even from the dead, there is nothing to fear. Not death, but life has the last word.

We heard the story of David and Goliath earlier. It starts with King Saul’s words: “you are not able to go against Goliath. You are just a boy.” David was the youngest in his family. His task was to look after his father’s sheep out in the fields whereas his older brothers were strong warriors who fought on the battlefields. His own family said to David: “you are not able to”. Yet the day came when the people of Israel had to fight the Philistines. There was one particular warrior, strong and very tall: Goliath. The Philistines said: “If one of your men can defeat and kill Goliath, you win the battle and we will surrender.” But Goliath was so frightening that not even the strongest of the Israelites had the courage to come forward. “We can’t defeat Goliath”, they said.

But along came the little brother, the sheep keeper that no one believed in, the handsome boy who on a first impression, had none of the characteristics that we would commonly associate with a warrior. But he had something that none of the others had: he had faith. He had faith in his own god-given talents and experiences. He said to King Saul: “I used to kill both lions and bears to save my father’s flock. Goliath to me is like one of those lions which I used to kill out in the fields.”

The little boy, the last of the brothers, had developed an extraordinary physical and mental strength. What really strikes me is that no one seemed to know about his strength. All they saw was a small, powerless boy. So where did David's strength come from? Maybe it was because out there in the fields there was no one to tell him "you are not able". Perhaps it was because out in the fields there was no one to stop him from trying. Out there in the fields, it was just him and the sheep, and he had the space to develop a profound relationship with God which gave him the courage to try. He had the space to develop a deep faith that no one could take away from him. Often in our lives we lack the space to develop our own faith. Amid all the voices that say "you are not able" it is hard to hear God's voice, the voice within us, that tells us: "you are able". David defeated Goliath. Not by the usual means of warfare, but with the techniques he learnt out in the fields and with his faith.

When King Saul agreed that he should try and defeat Goliath, they put him in the armour that the strong warriors used to wear in the battlefield, but little David couldn't even walk in it. He was not a strong warrior and he would never look like one. So he did what he did best: he had faith in his own abilities, and counted on God's protection. He took with him five stones and a sling, and with a precision accuracy, struck down and killed Goliath.

I have five stones here that represent the ones that David took with him to confront Goliath, and achieve the impossible. These five stones are an expression of David's faith. So when someone tells you: "you are not able to" think of David's five little stones and have faith.

Amen