

**17 September 2017**

**The Swiss Church in London**

**Eidgenössischer Dank-, Buss- und Bettag, Jeûne Fédéral, Federal Day of Thanksgiving, Repentance and Prayer**

**Reading Hebrew 12:12-17**

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears.

**Sermon**

To read a bible text is a bit like a detective's work. There are many references to events, places or people that we are not familiar with and therefore there are often a bit of a mystery and it takes some work of untangling to understand its meaning.

Today we want to untangle a reading taken from the Book of Hebrew chapter 12. The Book of Hebrew is in fact a letter and part of a series of letters in the New Testament that were sent to early Christian communities. The New Testament is the part of the Bible that tells us about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and thereafter of the first Christian communities who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God sent to save the world. The letters are therefore important contemporary documents informing us about the faith and life of the very first followers of Jesus Christ, and of their struggles and hopes. The most famous author of these letters was Apostle Paul, a man who was feared for persecuting Christians before he converted to Christianity himself and ultimately became the founder of Christian theology. Some of the letters were written by himself, some in his name, like the letter to the Hebrews. Paul was the first person to explore the deeper meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus and turned the huge disappointment of his death into a message of life and hope.

Everyone experiences disappointments in life, and perhaps you can think of a disappointment that occurred in your life: a failed relationship or the early death of a

loved one or an unfulfilled dream. In these moments the world can seem very dark and all hope sucked out of our future. This must have been the feeling of the disciples of Jesus when the person who they believed was the Son of God and their Saviour died a humiliating death on the Cross. It destroyed all their hopes and dreams for the future. But everyone who has been through traumatic experiences and came out alive on the other side also knows that at some point a sense of survival takes hold of us and perhaps even a new sense of joy and hope. This is what Paul explained to the early Christians in his letters: that the death of Jesus was not the end. It was the beginning of something new.

The letter to the Hebrews is addressed to Christians with Jewish roots living in Jerusalem. Many of these Jewish Christians were considering turning back to Judaism to escape persecution. The letter can therefore be read as an encouragement for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to persevere in the face of persecution. For us today who live in a safe country to have religious faith or not is often an individual choice and a matter of personal spirituality, but for people who are persecuted, tortured or imprisoned it can be a matter of life and death. It is the fuel, the only flame remaining, that keeps the spirit of survival and hope alive. Religious faith therefore is never only a matter of personal spirituality. To have faith is not a wellbeing programme of candles and soothing music. To have faith means to denounce injustice, to believe in change and to take responsibility for God's creation. It means to care for the people around us and in other parts of the world. Faith is uncomfortable because it is about the truth, and the reality of life is often brutal and raw.

On this Federal Day of Thanksgiving, Repentance and Prayer Swiss people remember the major disappointment and trauma that Switzerland had to go through in the aftermath of the reformation. It took Catholics and Protestants a very long time and a number of bloody conflicts to find a way of peaceful coexistence, and it was frowned upon until just a few decades ago to marry a spouse from the other church. We shall never take peace for granted. Today it is more important than ever to pray for and work towards peace and reconciliation between all religions and nations and to include all those in our prayers who are persecuted because of their faith. Today is an opportunity to include in our prayers also our Muslim and Jewish sisters and brothers, and people from all faith groups and none, to be united in one spirit, the spirit of peace. The letter to the Hebrews says about peace: *„Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled.”*

We know that it is not always easy to live in peace with everyone. It happens so quickly that we fall out with a friend, family member, work colleague or a stranger.

Back when this letter was written life in Jerusalem was everything but peaceful. “Pursue peace with everyone”, or in German “jagt dem Frieden nach” (chase after peace) takes the huge challenge that peace building is into consideration and encourages us to keep moving towards peace. Peace might sometimes be absent, but it should always be our primary aim to work towards, which can be a rocky climb. We have to overcome prejudice and hurt feelings. We have to overcome our pride and resentments.

„Pursue peace with everyone and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” the text goes on. Not only shall we pursue peace, but we shall also pursue holiness. Holiness is our gateway to God. Without holiness no one will see the Lord. But what does holiness mean? For Apostle Paul, who as earlier mentioned was the ‘inventor’ of Christian theology, all members of the body of Christ, all followers of Jesus, are holy. For our ears today this might sound alien. What about all those who are not members of the church? Are they not holy? We need to look at the historic context of the text to have a better understanding of its meaning. 2’000 years ago it was an incredibly revolutionary and even dangerous thing to say that normal people like you and I could be holy. To be holy, to be a saint, expresses a direct connection with God which was reserved for Priests, Kings and Queens and Emperors. But suddenly comes along Paul who says that everyone can be a saint through the faith in Jesus Christ. This opened up a whole new perspective and gave people back their dignity.

“Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see God.” – “Jagt dem Frieden nach mit allen und der Heiligung, ohne die niemand Gott schauen kann.”

We are holy because we are each blessed by God, and gifted with many different talents. This makes us God’s saints, but to be saints also comes with the responsibility to use our gifts and talents for the greater good, which is referred to in the Bible as the kingdom of God.

Someone who disregarded his gifts was a person called Esau. Esau was the son of Isaac and Rebekkah, and Isaac was the son of Abraham and Sara, the founding parents of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim religion (that’s why we call these three religions the Abrahamic religions). Esau was the firstborn of two brothers, his younger sibling being Jacob. *„See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears.”*

As we can tell from this text, Esau was a tragic figure. The story goes that he sold his rights and duties as a firstborn son to his younger sibling for a bowl of food, which he later in life terribly regretted and never quite got over it. He had thrown away his blessings and therefore also rejected his responsibility. Again, this text in our ears sounds quite harsh and unforgiving, because after all isn't it part of our human nature that we sometimes we lose track? I am sure that God is not as unforgiving as he is often portrayed in the Bible. We are given more than one chance if we are willing to turn around and seek our blessings. However, the story of Esau is a reminder of what can happen if we fail to recognise our gifts and talents and if we neglect our God-given gifts. It leads to bitter tears and regrets. What are your God given gifts, and what do you do to cherish them? How do you use your gifts to grow the kingdom of God for all people?

In our pursuit of peace and as saints of God we shall treasure and honour the gifts given to us and use them to build God's kingdom on earth together.

*"Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed."*

Amen