**Sermon, 16 October 2016**

Let’s start with a quiz. It’s a quiz about popular sayings in Swiss German.

Who knows the expression: “Was für es Tohuwabohu”? Or: “What a tohobohu!”

The word tohuwabohu, or tohobohu, is a biblical word. It can be found in the very first sentence of the Bible in the Book of Genesis that describes the creation of the earth. In Genesis 1:1 it says: *“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void.”* Or in German: *“Am Anfang schuf Gott Himmel und Erde, und die Erde war wüst und leer.”* The Old Testament, as most of you probably know, was originally written in Hebrew and only later translated in many different languages. Tohuwabohu is the Hebrew word for formless void, or wüst und leer.

There is another saying that is often used in Swiss German: “Was für en Habakkuk!” oder “Vezell doch nod so nen Habakkuk!” which translates into English with: “this is Habakkuk!” which simply means: “this is nonsense.”

Habakkuk was a prophet in the Old Testament in the 7th Century BC, and today we want to find out a bit more about prophet Habakkuk who according to the Swiss German saying talked a lot of nonsense.

Habakkuk lived in Jerusalem during the period of the first Temple. We remember: the Israelites escaped slavery in Egypt under their leader Moses and settled down in the Promised Land which is modern day Israel. Jerusalem became the religious and cultural centre and the Israelites built a Temple where they could worship God. This did not go unnoticed with the powerful neighbouring nations who felt threatened by the new religious cult that seemed to grow stronger and stronger each year. They were suspicious of the people who built their faith and trust on the one God, Jahwe. To believe in only one God, creator of heaven and earth, was a complete novelty at the time, and as human beings have always felt threatened by change and novelty, the powerful nations around Ancient Israel got their knifes out in the attempt to erase the followers of Jahwe. To date, the region of Palestine and Israel remains a hot spot for religious wars, division and violence. The dispute of whose right it is to live on these holy grounds goes right back to biblical times.

Habakkuk was not just any prophet, he was a temple prophet. Temple prophets worked and lived in the Temple of Jerusalem, and it was their role to warn God’s people of imminent threats and upcoming misfortune.

The Israelites were under threat by the Chaldeans who, in Habakkuk’s words, “marched through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own.” They are “dread and fearsome, they come for violence and gather captives like sand. They build towns on the blood of others and found their cities on inequality.” A frightening perspective indeed! Habakkuk knew that God’s people were in great danger.

Our world today is not unlike the world that Habakkuk was facing 2’700 years ago, and many of us feel insecure. Many share the feeling that our way of life and our values are under threat. Globalisation has brought the world closer together which, besides all the great benefits, also made us aware that the different peoples and nations sharing planet earth do not necessarily share the same values. We are brought up differently. We are taught different values. We pray to different gods, or none. And sometimes the fear of otherness becomes so predominant that people feel the need to defend themselves, and they take their weapons to go after those who are different. These can be real weapons, or the weapon of the word. Violence leads to more violence, and we only have to open the newspapers to find prove of this. The City of Aleppo became a sad symbol of the vicious circle of violence, and we can only imagine how this impacts on the psyche of the children, men and women who experience this ongoing violence day after day after day…

What is really confusing for many of us I believe is that we do not really know what we stand for anymore. There are so many leaders in this world behaving like prophets. They try to make us believe that change is threatening. They try to make us believe that novelties are undermining our values, just like the Chaldeans felt threatened by the believers of the one God who built a Temple in Jerusalem. They try to make us believe that things are really bad.

So what should we believe? What should we stand for and how can we distinguish the false from the true prophets?

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul says: “I am grateful to God whom I worship with a clear conscience. I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you. God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

These words come from a man who has persecuted and killed the early Christians. Before he became a Christian himself, he was scared of the new Jesus movement. He was scared that suddenly so many people believed in Jesus Christ as the long expected redeemer. He took his weapons to fight the Christians. But Paul later realised that violence is the wrong way. Violence is cowardice, whereas it takes a lot of courage to live in the spirit of love, and the spirit of empowerment and of self-discipline. To live in the spirit of love and empowerment means to accept and embrace what is new and different, and to give everyone the chance to live a dignified life. To live in the power of the spirit means to enable and encourage change rather than being scared of it.

Modern Europe is based on the principal of tolerance. We all consider ourselves more or less tolerant, but we also know that tolerance has its limit. Europe’s tolerance was tested in recent years with the diversification of lifestyles, cultures and religions. Suddenly we are not so sure anymore how tolerant we shall be. Suddenly we realise that our values are not necessarily common sense. This is not new. The modern concept of tolerance only dates back to the 17th Century and marks the end of bloody wars between Catholics and Protestants. It was a real struggle to find a way to live peacefully together, a struggle that we are living again these days. Our understanding of tolerance is closely intertwined with religious freedom. We tolerate and accept other religions, and yet sometimes they are so different from us. How diverse can Europe be? Are we willing to tolerate sub-cultures within our society that refuse to respect our legal system? Where are the boundaries, and what are our values?

False prophets like American presidential candidate Donald Trump or former UKIP leader Nigel Farage present us with straight forward answers. They know exactly where to draw the line between good and bad. They know exactly what is tolerable and what not. And they are quick to blame certain people or groups pretending that the absence of these people would make the challenge of human civilisation go away. Yet in reality it is almost impossible to draw a line. Our societies have always been diverse. They have been diverse when the Israelites settled in the Promised Land, they have been diverse when Paul established Christianity as a new religion. Diversity is challenging. False prophets may be easy to follow, but they will not lead us anywhere, certainly not onto the road of peace.

In his struggle Habakkuk prayed to God, seeking advice and direction. And God advised: “Never lose your vision. The spirit of the proud is not right. It is not right to plunder and to collect peoples as possession. Find the answers in the Temple keeping silence before God.” Habakkuk experienced the way to peace as the struggle it is, not an easy way, but a constant reflection of our values and our vision.

Our modern values of tolerance, gender justice and multiculturalism are not rocket science, they cannot be proved or measured. Our values are rooted in our Judeo-Christian faith, a faith that is based on the presumption that God’s law works for people and not against people.

Habakkuk was a wise prophet. His outcry for justice and against violence resonates with our values today. So how come that Habakkuk’s name is used for a saying that means that someone talks a lot of nonsense? What is the Habakkuk about Habakkuk’s prophecy? His words were uncomfortable for the exploiters and tyrants of his time, and they thought that Habakkuk’s outcry for justice and his defence of God’s law were nothing but Habakkuk - nothing but nonsense. An assumption that is probably shared by some of the current leaders…

However, Habakkuk defended the values of God’s law. He defended the people, and his prophecy is anything but Habakkuk.

Amen