

Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

14 October 2012

Gospel Reading: Mark 10, 17 - 31

Sermon

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen

For twenty two years now Germany has celebrated the reunification of the two Germanies on the third of October. Every year there are plenty documentaries, interviews and articles about how life was back then in the “German Democratic” Republic. I am sometimes amazed with how much nostalgia some people look back. If you listen to clergy from the East they will often tell you how much more Community Spirit there was back then, even within the Christian Congregation: How much more people helped each other and how readily they shared what they had. For many the introduction of market economy meant that those values were trampled on and that society has grown colder and colder ever since. It seems to be inevitable: Money and the prospect of wealth change people quite substantially. Money makes not only the world go round – it makes you trust in it quite easily.

Money promises freedom and security, so focusing on gaining more and more of it is very tempting. Martin Luther said: Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God.” (And he had money in mind when he said that) Money has the power to in that sense become our God.

Jesus in today’s gospel-reading is very clear about the danger of wealth. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” When I read this I literally see the entrance to the Kingdom of God narrowing before me – even though I don’t regard myself as super-rich, I am very aware of the material privileges I enjoy compared with the majority of the people in this world.

So it feels a bit dishonest to distance myself from the rich man in the gospel-reading, although I don’t find him very pleasant: He is in a very intrusive manner blocking Jesus’ way as he – Jesus - is just about to leave. “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asks, kneeling before him. And it seems as if Jesus is annoyed by this display of submission. That man is obviously very capable – not poor, not deaf nor blind nor lame. Why is he wasting his time and why is he calling him “Good teacher” without having heard a lesson, yet. He, on his appears to be a good pupil: “I’ve done all my homework, kept all the commandments, ticked all the boxes. So: Give me my rewards, tell me what else to do or tell me that I have finally done enough.

The rich man appears arrogant. He is used to be in control, he has the means, the resources, the talents to control what happens in his life. He is used to judge and to label people around him and he even takes the liberty of labeling Jesus as “good” – ignoring that it is God who is good and that it is for him to decide who can be called good. The rich man is used to acquire for himself everything he wishes – with one exception: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

In all affluence he does have the hunch that all that is nothing in the face of eternity. How do I escape my limitedness, how can I escape mortality.

Yes, he is very self-centered. But Jesus takes a second look and – loves him. And he gives him a lesson, a word that is “sharp and able to judge the thoughts and intuitions of the heart”, as Hebrews describes it. “You lack one thing” – Jesus says, and of course it is not just a “thing” – it is the whole direction of his life: Stop gaining, stop piling up wealth and achievements for yourself, turn around and let go of it all: GO and sell what you own and give to the poor. “GO!”, says Jesus, and it is the same word that he uses after he has healed someone: “GO, show yourself to the priest.”; “Take your mat and GO to your home.”; “GO, your faith has made you well.”

Go, says Jesus – “indeed, the word of God is living and active.” Go, get going, get up! Look around you. Realize you are part of a community and that includes the necessity of sharing material goods. Look, you are ultimately – not a self-made-man. You are one of God’s creatures and not meant to be separated and isolated, even though you regard exactly that as your freedom.

With telling him to give away all his possessions, Jesus want this rich man to get in touch again with his own humanity and with all that comes with it: Being vulnerable, needy, limited, mortal. He wants to show him that for his own best, because he loves him: “Let no longer your worries or anxieties paralyze you. Get going, follow me. – But he doesn’t. He cannot, his many possessions hold him back. Being asked to let go of them probably feels like being asked to walk on water – it makes him loose all that he so far has regarded as solid ground under his feet.

What does this encounter of Jesus and the rich man teach us?

First of all, it teaches me, that in this case Jesus does not say: “Go, your faith has made you well” – difficult for me, because for me as a Lutheran the “sola fide” – justification through faith alone is quite a central thought and believe. But no: When it comes to wealth and the question of how to deal with abundance on the one side and poverty on the other side, real action needs to be taken.

Secondly: The Christian faith is not “post materialistic”; it does not allow us to skip over the question “What do you do with what you have got? How do you use your talents, your resources, your possessions?”

And thirdly: Christ calls us to let go of our individual worries about “What must I do, so that I inherit eternal life?” We are called into relationship, we are called to be the body of Christ, to care for one another, to provide for one another, to be generous and to trust that God at the end will provide for us in his kingdom – for God all things are possible. Amen.

*Antje Schwartau*