

We do not lose heart

Sermon on 2 Cor.4,14 + 16-18 for English Church Service

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The Grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

The situation today in Germany and all over the world causes resignation among many people. We hear about terror, bomb attacks and war nearly every day. The hunger in Africa, specially in the so called "Sahel-zone", is growing. The number of nationalistic governments is increasing. And we know: The next few years will be difficult for the churches as well. Maybe your personal situation is not easy. So it is good to hear from the Apostle Paul how the message of Easter can bring hope into our lives.

The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth: We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

Dear brothers and sisters,

"We do not lose heart!" Resignation is spreading all around us but we do not lose heart. Young people are fed up. Older people recognise resignedly that "It is all pointless. Nothing will change." And the very old see that their end is coming. Everybody looks for comfort in whatever little enjoyment they can find. But we, says the Apostle, "We do not lose heart!"

As a young man I had the wonderful possibility of spending part of my training as an assistant pastor in Jerusalem. On several occasions, I took advantage of spending some free days in Sinai on the Red Sea.

The best of it for me was to be able to go snorkelling among the coral reefs near the shore of the Red Sea. If you are standing on the shore, perhaps only a few meters from the reef, you cannot see anything of the world hidden in those coral reefs. But just 40 cm below the surface of the water there is an incomparable world of sea flora and fauna. The most fantastic corals, the brightest coloured fish, the most surprising expressions of the under-water animal and plant world are normally very close to the shore. But it is quite im-

possible to see any of this from the beach. Only when you put your head under the water will a new world open up before you. When you have been snorkelling among the coral reefs of the Red Sea you can really appreciate how beautiful God's creation is there as well. The glorious under-water world of the coral reefs, which exists but cannot be perceived with our senses out of the water, has become an image for me of the tremendous glory of the reality of God which is beyond measure, which is already there and gives us life although it is invisible to the naked eye. But, because this invisible reality can already give us life, we dive again from time to time into God's glorious world. In faith we are already able to taste the beginnings of God's glory and so we do not lose heart.

Some years ago I had to make two visits of condolence to church members on the same day. One of the people had died in God. I found a group of mourners who were not in despair. Naturally, the survivors were also feeling their loss but, because they had something to hold onto in their lives and knew that the deceased person had had something to hold onto, they had not lost heart.

In the case of the other person who had died, the relatives said, "He was not against God or the church." But obviously that family does not believe really in God and they didn't feel the comfort which Jesus Christ can give. During my visit, the relatives sat together sadly in a rather confused state. No one really knew how they should behave after the grandfather's death. So that day I learnt a lesson about what it means when someone dies in God or someone has lived without God being a reality in their life. If you trust in God you do not need to lose your courage even in the face of death and dying.

There is some kind of spook going around among us. The spook is called frustration. Around me here in Pomerania I see all the efforts our staff and our pastors are making to build up the church in their congregations, but very few young people come forward for confirmation, the number of baptisms is dropping and many – especially hopeful young families – are moving out of the region. Pomerania is one of the poorest areas of Germany. We have places where the unemployment rate is still very high. Lots of people, specially in the rural areas, are asking themselves, "Is it worth sticking it out here any longer?"

In this situation the Apostle Paul's distinction between the outer nature which is wasting away and the inner nature which is renewed day by day can help us. Suffering and disappointments are experiences which help us to grow inwardly. We can see that in a little story. There was a man who could not bear to see anything beautiful or healthy. He found a young palm tree growing marvellously in an oasis, but he took a heavy stone and put it right in the centre of the tree's crown. Then he went off laughing. But the palm tree tried to throw off the weight. It shook itself and bowed over. It plunged its roots deeper into the soil until they reached a hidden source of water. This

power from below and the sun's warmth from above made it grow into a mighty palm tree which was also able to support the stone. Years later, the man came back to enjoy the sight of the crippled palm. The palm tree lowered its crown so he could see the stone and said, "I owe you thanks. Your heavy weight has made me strong!" Outward tribulations can help us to take root in God and draw strength from his invisible energies.

Suffering in the present can help us to be rooted in the energies of eternity. It is almost inevitable for Christians to suffer in this world. A Christian life and the structures of this world are opposites. Anyone who tries to live as a Christian will not be oil in the works of life but more like sand in society. If you try to live honestly as a Christian you must expect some people to turn their backs on you. If you do not want to hurt anyone, you cannot hope to live consciously as a Christian. The ordinary divisions and separations which result from living a conscious Christian life are painful in themselves. But someone who wishes to lead life in communion with Jesus Christ will be given a share of the tremendous glory of the life to come. If you live as a disciple of Jesus, you will come up against obstacles in your life. But through baptism you are bound up with Jesus Christ. That bond is inseparable and cannot even be destroyed by death. The great Danish philosopher, Søren Kirkegaard, left instructions that the following inscription should be put on his tomb stone:

"A short time more, and then the victory will be won;
Then the whole battle will have vanished into nothingness;
Then I shall be able to drink from the springs of life
And converse with Jesus for ever and ever."

The comfort found in inseparable communion with Jesus Christ is able to surpass the suffering that will take place. When my first wife died at the age of 34 after suffering from cancer for two years, we decided to put that saying of Kirkegaard's at the top of her obituary. We face troubles but because of our communion with Jesus Christ we do not lose heart. The things we can see are temporary. The career for which we were perhaps working in our profession, the position we have reached, the titles we attach to our names – all of these things are temporary. The houses and flats which we have decorated, the impressive buildings and the roads and motorways their time will pass. Only the invisible remains for ever. In our lives we have to decide whether we want to be superficial people or people with depth. People who decide to live their lives with Jesus Christ discover that the world is full of colour. A new dimension comes into their lives. Therefore it is good, that since three years by the English Church Services here in Greifswald we have the opportunity to deepen our lives.

If you only try to get what is visible, you remain on the surface and have no depth. So the question we must answer is what we want to make of our lives. Through our link with Jesus Christ our lives gain breadth and depth which we

cannot create ourselves. That gives our lives a perspective of eternity. And it also helps us not to lose heart.

May I ask you whether your courage sometimes flags? I must admit that mine does sometimes. My ministry is not always easy, but I have heard the message. I do not want just to see the visible, the large figures and statistics which attempt to keep a hold on visible success. My ministry is for God. He gives comfort. He renews me inwardly, day by day. My wish is that we together – you and I - experience that time and again. Because we know that Jesus Christ in whom we believe has risen from the dead and is alive, so there are good grounds for this wish. And therefore we do not lose heart.

Amen

May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.