

Jesus and Beelzebul

Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.' Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? - For you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore, they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Dear Congregation,

Yes, the **Gospel**, the Good News, can sometimes be very **harsh**. Did we hear correctly just now? *Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. ?*

The **temptation** is great to **soften the harshness** of those words, to re-interpret them and say: 'Surely Jesus didn't mean it quite as harshly as that?' But perhaps it's not a bad idea to allow these harsh words of the Gospel to prick our consciences at the end of the Church Year. Let us allow Jesus to say to us today: 'Whoever does not, in his or her own way, work for my cause, works against me. I can manage without those who do not support me with their strengths and talents. Even if you hear my words, believe in me, but are in other respects lukewarm and without commitment, then I can't use you!' (Whew!!)

Perhaps it is possible for us to accept these words today if I continue to **explain** what is meant here: If I read in the Bible now and then, I am still not one of His people. If I go to church more or less regularly, I am nowhere near being ok - in His eyes. If we have our children baptized and confirmed and pay our church contributions, we are nowhere near being pleasing to Him.

We need to digest this for a while. But Jesus' words are even clearer, harsher still: Whoever does not gather, scatters! If you don't bring people to Jesus, then you drive them away from Him.

If my faith in Him does not result in deeds for the benefit of my fellowmen, then I do more harm to His cause than good.

- At this point I would like to **pause a moment** so that we allow these hard words to take effect. - But now we are actually once again busy trying to soften the blow. (We pause, swallow - and try to re-interpret!) When I read these words, I admit that I ducked a bit, waiting for the effect to pass. ,It is surely not meant as harshly as that."

- Dear congregation, **it is meant that way!**

There are other words in the Bible that say something similar: ,Let what you say simply be ,yes' or ,no'; anything more than this comes from evil.' (Matthew 5,37) Surely that means: **When you say yes to me, then really say it! If you reject me, then do it altogether!** Those who are lukewarm are an abomination to me! Or in another place Jesus says: **,Whoever does not pick up his cross and follow me, is not worthy of me!**" - His message doesn't want to reach your ears and perhaps your heart only, **it wants to claim all of you**, your hands when they work for Him, your feet when they tread in His footsteps, all your strength, even when you go through suffering and darkness.

And at this point everyone is probably asking him- or herself: **Who can actually stand, exist before Him?** Who does Jesus actually want to be close to Him?

- I answer this question absolutely seriously and with complete conviction - even if it seems to contradict everything I have just said - **He wants all of mankind, He wants you and He wants me!**

But remember: He also said elsewhere: ‚I am with you even to the end of the age.‘ He does not leave us to get on with it alone. We are able to rely on His strength.

The story at the beginning of the text was about a man who was unable to speak. Jesus heals him - **he learns how to speak** and really does talk; how could he be silent when he has experienced something like this with Jesus? We know of other stories where people were healed, we know of lame people who walk and jump, of lepers who are healed and guilt-ridden people who are made free, of blind people who are able to see ...

What do these people do? Do they keep to themselves what has happened to them through Jesus? Do they keep it private, lock it up inside themselves, grateful, yes, but not noticeable to those around them? No! We see them running through the streets of their town, shouting out to everyone within ear-shot: Jesus has healed me! - and that, even though Jesus told them not to speak about it. Yes, they can't do anything else but tell everybody ecstatically of their joy, praising Jesus again and again, the One who gave them this amazing gift! They shout it in their faces, this wonderful thing that has happened to them! This is how the good, the salvation that they have received from Jesus, becomes visible in their lives - they become **witnesses of Christ**.

But, just a moment! Let's think! O gosh! **We haven't experienced anything like that.** We haven't been healed by Jesus. We have no joy to pass on, joy that originates with Him. Why should we rush out into the world and shout about what we have not experienced? What could cause us to run out and pass on the good news, to give us hands that help as He did and a voice that tells and confesses about him? - We are only the congregation, named after Him; we only hear and speak about what

He did, **long ago, more than 2000 years ago.**

“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me, scatters.“ This Lord knows that He has to **talk straight** with us! This Lord knows our **lethargy**, our **lukewarmness** and, particularly: our **poor memory**.

Even if we're not yet in the mood for it, the decorations in the supermarkets and the ‚Christmas Jingle‘ tell us unmistakably: In a few weeks it's Christmas. But what does that actually mean? Well, the great God is to become one of us, yes, he begins in an even greater state of poverty than any of us. The angels sing something about the great joy of mankind. Have we forgotten that? Do we no longer understand the meaning of: **God - one of us!** Don't we have an idea of the love that is behind all this? - And we don't have a message to shout out? - And then, in your very personal life: The gift of health, all the other gifts, the family in which you are cherished and feel safe, friends who take you seriously, a job, the ability to satisfy your physical hunger, a place to stay, a house, a place where you belong ... Need I say any more? **Have we really not experienced anything good?**

And then, very specifically, the **Gospel**: Have you never been able to breathe a sigh of relief when you heard that God is merciful? In spite of the words at the beginning of the text? Has it never comforted you that even death is now no longer the end? Have you never become happy with the realisation that a life in this mercy has a purpose, has value without end...? And He has not made you well? You see no reason to be joyful? - **Who does Jesus want close by Him?** He wants you, he wants me! We just need to allow Him to pluck us out of our shell. And we must remember: His message and His promise - for us! Remember His deeds - 2000 years ago - **for us!**

I really don't know how anyone who has experienced something with Jesus, be it forgiveness, be it guidance, be it the gift of joy, be it happiness in life or the love of another human being – how such a person can remain silent, keep it all to him- or herself, without passing it on, **sharing the joy** and thus also helping someone else to **find life**.

We need to learn to speak!

“Whoever is not with me is against me.” What does being with Him mean? Being with Him could probably mean not allowing His words to become silent in our lives. Let **us tell others** what we know about Him, what He has done amongst men and how He has faithfully given His people the strength to live. And let's begin with our **children**; let us tell them about Him!

Being with Him could probably mean being **infected with His lifestyle** and meeting people without any prejudices, not categorising them with our prior knowledge of them – allowing them a **new beginning** in the same way that I am able to start anew every day – through Him. Being a little more **friendly** would probably suit many of us well – I don't mean that constant smile that we are able to master so easily, but rather the considerate and sensitive handling of even difficult people, which does not come easily to us. And we can actually begin with our neighbour, that is often difficult enough.

Being with Him could probably mean thinking about the **other masters** that we follow. We could think about our attitude towards possessions – and about what we deprive others of. Perceive how important our house and our car is to us – and how great, by comparison, our sacrifices for the poor and hungry are. Think about how often during the day we try to accomplish our own will – and how seldom His. And we could start with this from today!

It could mean a lot of other things: **Being with Him**. Every one of us – in his or her own way – will find ways to follow Him. We have reason enough to participate in His good news – we must just **remind ourselves**.

We tend to remember things most easily when **someone tells** us, someone speaks to us, blasts it, so to speak, into our ears and hopefully into our heart. That is what the **Divine Service** is for, the sermon, the sacraments, yes even the hymns and prayers – to tell us again: **You are a human being, loved and redeemed by God, saved, and given back your health – You belong to Him** – and now go with Him, be with Him on your journey through this world. Once that becomes clear to us, because it is told to us clearly, then we will find ways of passing it on, taking it along and bringing it out into the world. We know that the **mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart**. Then we will not be lethargic, lukewarm, or lazy, but rather we will walk the road of life in **joy and happiness together with Him**.

Amen

Sermon by Pastor Felix Meylahn, held in German on the 3rd last Sunday of the Church Year in 2011, and translated into English for 3rd last Sunday of the Church Year in 2017.