

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

I read to you the sermon text for today: *<sup>16</sup> So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, <sup>18</sup> 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.*

Lord our God, you are looking for connecting points in our lives in order to reach us with your infinite love. We thank you for that. Amen

Dear Congregation,

"Jubilate" is the name of our Sunday today, and it encourages us to celebrate, to cheer and to express our feelings in exuberant singing - in the same way as the birds do in our gardens every morning when the sun is about to rise. But when I contemplated on today's sermon text, I was struck by the pairs of words indicating opposites

(wasting away ... renewed;

affliction ... glory;

temporary ... eternal)

and I must admit that the negative terms corresponded more to my own experience than the positive ones: affliction rather than glory, decay rather than renewal. Perhaps you can understand me. The word "affliction" ("troubles" in other translations) became the most meaningful in the text for me. How many times have I / we become tired? How many among us have noticed that they are physically or mentally less active, especially when compared to young or idle people?

For Paul, the author of the second Epistle to the Church in Corinth, 'troubles' (afflictions) was not just a word, but an experience in a thousand variations. He was often in danger during his missionary journeys. He almost drowned in raging mountain rivers and was

shipwrecked three times on the Mediterranean. Once he was found and rescued after a day and a night on the open sea. He almost died of thirst in the desert and was attacked by robbers. Betrayed by pagans, Jews and his own Christian brothers, he was sent to prison, where he was tortured, sentenced for his faith and punished with beatings and stoning.

For him, 'troubles' (afflictions) were something else too: in the face of the gigantic task God had given him, he often felt weak and miserable. He wanted to communicate his experience with Christ to people throughout Asia Minor (today's Turkey), through Greece, Italy, and even wanted to do so in Spain, to build a network of churches and keep them alive. But again and again he suffered failures. He burned with impatience when he had to spend weeks in jail, worried about his life's work, because due to his personal circumstances he could not intervene when others ruined his work in the communities.

Yes, such people existed in Corinth. They were celebrated as shining apostles and captivated the members of the church by their outward appearance. They called themselves "angels of light," and we can see the unfavourable comparison between them - in white, urban robes, freshly bathed - and Paul, coming from the dusty highway, perhaps still limping from the last abuse, half ill from the rigors of a journey without the means of transport we know today. Paul was an expert in troubles of all kinds.

The amazing thing about him, however, is that he does not say, "See what a tough guy I am, see what I've already coped with and what I do for you!"

When he talks about his troubles, miseries and needs, he always fears that he could boast too much. Instead he admits that he is a frail, almost decrepit man, often persecuted by misfortune, who outwardly has nothing to show compared with the "shining apostles" in Corinth.

And yet this man is full of confidence. He is quite sure that to each of us and to each Christian community his experiences of weakness, suffering and failure are more important and timeless than brilliant leaders. Paul knows that he has received his ministry from God, that is why he never walks alone through deserts and rushing rivers, he is not alone in jail at night when waiting for the torments of a new day. Contrary to all expectations, he often felt like a new creation and felt refreshed. It was his experience that all troubles will come to an end, they are temporary. He was convinced that behind all visible misery there is a glory, invisible in most cases, a glory, which we approach through the hand of God, but which sometimes already now shines forth and can make us rejoice. For Paul, the office conferred on him consists of sharing all these experiences and using them as a realistic foundation to build communities:

- that can also find their way to God through persecution and hardship,
- that are free of 'shining' leaders with lame promises.

Every one of these communities should be able to cope with their troubles with God's help and overcome death in resurrection through Christ.

The name "Jesus Christ" does not appear in our sermon text. But a few sentences earlier, Paul explains

- that the decaying person can be renewed,
- that from tribulation glory can be revealed,
- that visible things that are limited by time, can become invisible and eternal:

Like Jesus, we are constantly, being led to the limits of our existence, to misfortune and death, but also, as he is, protected by God and then raised again. Paul firmly believes that he is bound to Jesus or, so to speak, is able to live in a way absolutely parallel to him. Like Jesus, he has learned that failures, disease - and, as he believes, even death - do not mean the end of a Messiah, an Apostle, or any Christian, but that in these we experience God's infinite help.

Jesus interpreted becoming a political leader or a brilliant folk hero as a temptation of the devil, as the wrong way. He did not want to stand out among others and be powerful, a "top cat", so to speak. Instead, he went the way that most of us must go, along a path full of difficulties, disappointments and, yes, along the road leading to death.

He offered comfort and help for us, along this normal human path. His message was: No matter what happens to you, God holds you and draws you to himself into peace and perfection, sometimes even here in this life, but then, completely, in eternity.

How many times have we been left to pick up the piece? How many times has it happened to us older people that we were topped by younger, smarter or more beautiful people? Who of us has not already suffered from his or her own incompetence, has not experienced that he or she had planned far too much and then failed miserably? Who among us has not once imagined that he or she was indispensable? And then we are shown that we are not needed as much as we thought; as a friend or a life partner, at our workplace, where so many are retrenched; or as parents whose children want to find their way alone; or as old people who must re-create a new circle of friends where they are important in their environment. Again and again we put a lot of effort into life and try in various areas not to get tired and make a difference. But again and again we come up against painful limits. How do we react to such situations?

We often try to lie about reality. The aging mother tells her acquaintance about loving children, although she has not heard from them for a long time. The unemployed man continues to leave his home at the same time each morning so that the neighbours do not notice that he has been retrenched.

Maybe even as we get older, we try to stop or disguise our natural decay with cleverly chosen clothing, a different hairstyle, diet and

medication. We suppress the idea of death, our own or that of those close to us. We pretend that our love knows no limits. We blame each other when we are disappointed in someone else or in ourselves.

Paul recommends that the church in Corinth – and also we – should react differently in the midst of our troubles. We should not deny our weaknesses and not suppress our failures.

"Out of the depth, I call, Lord, to you, Lord, hear my voice." And when we turn to God in dire need, we should not think that we can use God like a crutch, with which we manage to hobble a few steps in the most extreme emergency and are then glad to get rid of them again.

God wants to be a real helper for us,

- who gives us the necessary confidence on our daily path,
- who allows us to walk upright in spite of humiliation,
- without whom we are helpless and at everybody's mercy,

and therefore, we should not lose sight of our helper for a second.

God can also help us to overcome disappointments through love, because we know that only his love is boundless and eternal. Therefore, we should not overtax anyone by asking too much of him or by refusing to forgive him. Paul was often disappointed in his churches and yet he loved them again and again.

Above all, Paul would recommend that we do not constantly think around the goal of our life, as if there were no end. For him, this, the end, is the point when all troubles are over. He longs for the resurrection and for a life with God that will be endless – infinite. He knows that he will be able to rest after all his busy life on earth and is looking forward to it.

Therefore, as long as he lives, he does not become tired in his office, and that is why he was able to do incredible things: On his three missionary journeys through Asia Minor and

Greece, he walked about 3,700 km on foot or used primitive means of transport and, with the establishment of Christian communities, was more involved in world-history than almost any other person.

Let us be convinced by Paul: We live our lives best when we realistically see our weaknesses as an essential part of our lives and expect failures. And yet, we should not stop wanting to move mountains with God as a powerful helper when we try to create a liveable life for all around us.

We should also refuse to live without the idea of God's glory, a glory into which we sometimes have a little insight here on earth and which becomes perfect when we are with God: the glory of continual renewal, of constant power and eternal love.

Amen.

Lord, you yourself went through the depths of human troubles, because you wanted to be completely human. Let us understand our weakness as an essential part of us! Let us realise that without your help we cannot get along, but with you we can become happy people and helpful, towards all with whom we are on our journey to God and His eternal perfection.

Amen