

Dear congregation,
 During the past weeks I had visitors. Relatives came with friends from Hamburg. On Monday they left and now it is quiet in my house. On Tuesday, I sat down and began to prepare today's service. And realised - oh no - I'm supposed to preach on one of the top texts of the Old Testament - oh my goodness, can I handle that? - Because Jeremiah is one of the great prophets of Israel and for me, the most likeable.

He was strong, because he did not blame their opponents for the impending disaster of his people. He blamed his own people for that. In sensational and outrageous speeches, it was particularly the ruling upper class that he attacked and affronted, those who set the tone in the palace and the temple, in courts and trading houses.

And he warned them: Do not resist the Babylonian Super Power that is invading the country. Even under their rule you can and should serve God. As a result, Jeremiah was insulted as a traitor and nearly lynched. He was found guilty of high treason and imprisoned. And eventually he went missing in exile in Egypt.

For me he is likable, because so much of his personality is familiar to us too: He suffered under his prophetic office like no other and that which he was meant to prevent, according to God's will, he just seemed to accelerate.

Jeremiah's desperate lamentations about the triumph of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous are among the most moving passages of Scripture.

However, one thing he never doubted was that God had spoken to him, called and commissioned him.

But how can I talk about him with reference to our life and understanding of life today?

On Wednesday, at the house church, we talked about today's Psalm 40. In the group the phrase came up: "I want to be myself" - and immediately my thoughts were on the sermon text and no longer on Psalm 40! And I have to admit, I was very impolite to Anthea and Chris and did not stay for coffee but hurried home and sat down at my desk. And there

I pondered on the following thoughts and situations:

- A person lives his life - all to himself. He wants no human soul to take care of him, he feels strong enough on his own: »For once I want to be me, only me! «
- Another person can't cope; from one day to the next he bails out of his social environment, irrespective of what he is or stands for: - »I want to be me, once and for all, only me! «
- And yet another says: »I want to follow my own inclinations, I want to experiment, to inspire my imagination, to discover unknown possibilities within me: »I want to be me, once and for all! «
- Young people stand up, distance themselves from all the traditions, protest against the ideals of their parents; then they encounter resistance, cannot meet the conditions of world and society, they experience rejection, slip away and think - »I just want to be me, only me! «
- A woman leaves her family. She's fed up with the same eternal reactions to the same eternal circumstances, the screaming of the children, the never-ending problems of her husband at his work place, and finally says - »I just want to be me, only me! «

This list could be continued endlessly. Each of us, at one time or another, wishes he/she could change the time, find another way of life, seeks for his or her own "alter ego". We all try to change the meaningless things of the past into meaningful ones for our lives.

Some may find their "self," their "ego"! But many, sadly, will "resign", and just as sadly, become "human robots". Many may appear to return remorsefully to so-called positive "reality," and consequently become, as the saying goes, "reasonable." But what does that mean for their "ego" for their "self being"?

Nowadays we often hear slogans like: self-discovery, self-determination, self-realization! But what do these slogans mean, which ideals do they represent or, more precisely - what are they worth in terms of human values? Ought we really to follow them? Or do those slogans only lead to self-centeredness -

which is simply egotism, selfishness? Where can we find answers?

In such moments it is always helpful for us Christians to look into the Bible. In the Old Testament, the first major part of the Bible, we find a story that tells how someone finds his so-called "self." The Prophet Jeremiah (1:4-10) states:

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I said, 'Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the LORD said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.'

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.'

What are we told? Does the prophet find his "self," his "ego?" And if he finds it - where does he find it and how does he find it? Does Jeremiah find it himself? Or is it given to him?

And again, if we look at his actual life:

- Does Jeremiah discover and accept the meaning of his life?
- Are his actions clear and genuine even in the midst of all worldly things and is his attitude towards life clear and unshakeable?
- Is everything he does credible and hopeful? Is everything for him firmly established and steadfast?

In our text we hear: Everything starts with God. He enters the life of the prophet and says: *I knew you before I formed you in the womb.* This was promised to most of us at a time, where we could not really hear and understand it yet - at baptism; it was promised to you: you are not only the child of your parents, just a definable mix of genes. You are here because no one less than God Himself wants you to be here.

And hasn't this response been repeated during the course of our lives, of your life? Your value and your right to exist does not depend

- on what you can demonstrate in terms of achievements and merits.
- And your value does not diminish either, because of the many things you have left undone or opportunities you have wasted.
- Your value is not even diminished by the fact, that you have lived your life without Him who has so enriched your life.
- And your value and significance will not be lessened by the fact that your strength is weakening, and you are becoming increasingly dependent on the help and consideration of others.

Your worth and your dignity were already established before you entered this life; your worth and your dignity remain completely independent of the way you have led your life and how others will judge you. Let it be proclaimed to you, for God's sake: You are wanted, called and needed by God, with your life as it is. Therefore: fear not!

But returning to Jeremiah: He answers his call with an objection: *I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.* ... and I think each of us would offer another objection or excuse. And our individual life objections will keep changing, depending on our circumstances. We always object, when our life differs from the life we wanted. (Remember what I said earlier on about "I just want to be myself".)

But just imagine if you got the opportunity to plan your life exactly as you wished, from implementing your career path to having your family situation and everything else as you wanted it. Surely everything would have gone differently, but would it also have been better?

As far as I'm concerned, I doubt it. Because my self-assessment of what I can and cannot do, has too often proved to be premature and irresponsible. The school of life has shaped me, it was good for me and made me mature. I have faced many instances when I felt completely out of my depth and where I would have preferred to run away.

And now and then I still feel like running away when something that I am expected to do seems too difficult or meaningless.

But it helps me to stand fast if I remind myself of God's words: *"Do not say, I am only a boy; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."*

Jeremiah felt this way too, but he was chosen by God before all time, he was instructed to continue to speak the word of God, and to give witness of God to the world. All this is part of Jeremiah's «self", the foundation on which he stood, the guiding principle of his life in the time in which he lived; he was *"appointed as a prophet for the nations!"*, for all people.

Behold, saith God, I put my words in your mouth. God does not speak to us directly from the sky, not in a spectacular supernatural way. God speaks to us through people. And wherever I myself heard his call, there were people who talked, painted, sang, or made music.

And how am I to recognise that this is more than a human voice, more than a human word? How am I to distinguish between the word of man and the word of God? On the one hand, I recognise God's Word because it hits me in my heart and I am unable and unwilling to avoid it. And I recognise that the person who speaks to me in such a way does not pursue his own interests. I recognise God's Word when I measure it against the person who embodied God's Word - Jesus Christ. I recognise God's Word by the fact that it bravely rebels against everything that tends to make people appear small and despicable and everything that masks or glosses over bad relationships. I acknowledge God's Word for its commitment to peace and justice and the fact that it does not allow itself to be dissuaded.

And Jeremiah? He doubts: he doubts that God's purpose is right for him; he doubts that the way God has chosen for him can be feasible; yes, he even doubts the insight and foresight and wisdom of God: And I can only ask: Oh, Lord, is that the way I am going?

God's choice does not mean loneliness and not just blind obedience on the part of mankind, and then even being abandoned and being self-reliant. Rather, God does not leave anyone alone; he takes away the fear; he promises his presence; he guarantees his help.

He who accepts God's choice, accepts it for himself and his life and therefore trusts in the guidance of God, is not alone. Jeremiah can live with this; and really live, live confidently and with self-confidence!

But what does "self-discovery, self-determination, self-realisation" mean, from a Christian point of view, when looking at Jeremiah's fate, and also considering Jesus' life and destiny? Whoever wants to realise himself, find himself, and wants to do this in a Christian way, can certainly not understand this to be a "self-asserting-desire" - achieved through one's own strength and reason. And so we find that another aspect of Jeremiah's vocation is important: God says: *Behold, I set you today over peoples and kingdoms.* People called by God do not rule over others, but it is clear that they are also not dependent on the opinions and norms of others.

Those called by God cannot be patronized, domineered over - not by parties, by associations, communities and not by church leaders, and definitely not by market laws and so-called practical constraints.

Priority for those called by God are not the general interests of their own people. Their priority is always the person in distress, no matter how hopeless the situation is. Those called by God do not ask about what pays off or whether it is worth it but about what counts in God's eyes.

As steadfastly as they stand for their beliefs and fight for majorities, so they are not dependent on success. The end result of the efforts of whoever is called to serve, can be left to the one who sent them.

Amen.