

Sermon, Sunday, March 27th St. Andrew's Chesterton, Antje Schwartau

Jeremiah 8:8 – 9:3

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

“We look for peace, but find no good, for a time of healing, but there is terror instead...”. The reading this morning is tough: Jeremiah's gloomy words seem to speak to us directly from the point of utter despair and depression, the point of a deep and excruciating trauma. All trust is gone, all faith is gone, all hope is gone, all health is gone. The disappointment is profound and a turning point not in sight.

It is painful for us to see how the images of this text seem to apply so directly and seamlessly to the situation of our world today – with terror and war and natural disaster going on. What is the meaning of all that evil happening? Why does God allow all that to happen? It is a difficult, nagging question and I would say that interpreting all these catastrophes as God's punishment would be presumptuous and inappropriate and clearly not for us to do.

For the prophet Jeremiah, 2,600 years ago, that was not in question – things *were* clear to him. He in his time saw the threat of war, destruction and eviction looming ahead. And for him undoubtedly what happened to his people was God's punishment. It was, in his eyes, the result of the failure of his people and their leaders, the result of failure not only in foreign policy, but even more a failure in values, spirituality and faith – the failure of a small nation cosyng up to the neighbouring great powers, leaving behind the loyalty to their own god Jahweh and his law, sacrificing their relationship with God for quick profit.

“...from the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain. ... They say ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace.”

It is disturbing how unwaveringly Jeremiah sticks to his desolation and his pessimistic view, but it is also disturbing how right his diagnose still is and it is sobering for us to realize how little mankind has learned.

The greed for unjust gain still rules the world: The greed for unjust gain of resources and power – be it power in terms of fuel or electricity or in terms of ruling over people's lives and freedom. This greed seems to be unslakable. It produces conflict, war and destruction. We see powers longing for more power and must confess that a big part of our material wealth is owed to our careless "Peace, peace" – saying and at the same time silently accepting that the wounds of injustice within our world are treated carelessly and superficially.

Greed is one of the strong opponents to grace. It has power to poison relationships – relationships between nations, groups or individuals. It can poison our relationship with ourselves and with God. Greed is infectious, but paradoxically it brings out what it most fears, and that is: Deficiency – deficiency in love, in blessing, in happiness. Where greed reigns, God's love seeps away without reaching through to the roots. And that means a lack of nourishment, no power to bring to bloom the love, that God actually has sown into us, love that he actually wants to nurture within us. He, like a passionate farmer or gardener is longing to see the fruits grow: fruits of love, of faith, of hope – within us and amongst us. The climate of greed and egoism on the contrary lets the leaves wither and no fruits can be found, no figs, no grapes.

The mere idea that we could be such a sad and unhealthy plant, the idea that fruitlessness may stand at the end of our way, is threatening.

Nobody wants to be a fruitless tree. The idea that other people or even God could consider us fruitless, useless, simply a failure, makes us feel uncomfortable and ashamed. And that feeling of shame often again leads us to that superficial "Peace, peace"-saying when actually doubt is nagging under the surface beneath.

So how then can the healing begin? How can finally the lament turn into a song of joy, how can the green leaves start to sprout again? It is quite obvious that Jeremiah simply is not at that point, yet, where he would want to talk about healing. He is stuck so deeply in his anger and sadness that he just cannot let go of it. He himself asks: "Is there no physician there?" We cannot expect a quick fix from him.

It is not easy – but there are hints. One thing is: The crying. "O, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night." Jeremiah says. Even though crying is not

pleasant and should not become a permanent state – it can mean that we start to connect honestly with our emotions, feelings of loss, shame and failure. The water of tears can become the water that the Holy Spirit hovers above to bring out a new creation to call new life into being so that we ourselves become creative and fruitful again.

The other hint is: Moving away, going to a lodging place in the desert, unwelcoming as it may sound, moving away from the scene of conflict at least for a time to set an end to the vicious circle that keeps us from being fruitful. It can mean to leave behind all distractions and to try and stop dwelling on sadness, it can mean giving up superficial company for a relationship that is built on a deeper honesty, even daring to risk emptiness and loneliness to find out that finally there is no emptiness and loneliness, but that there is God, waiting for us, wanting to be our physician - a physician to help us make an end to proceeding from evil to evil but making us go from strength to strength, so that he himself finds a lodging place within us – a lodging place in our hearts. Amen