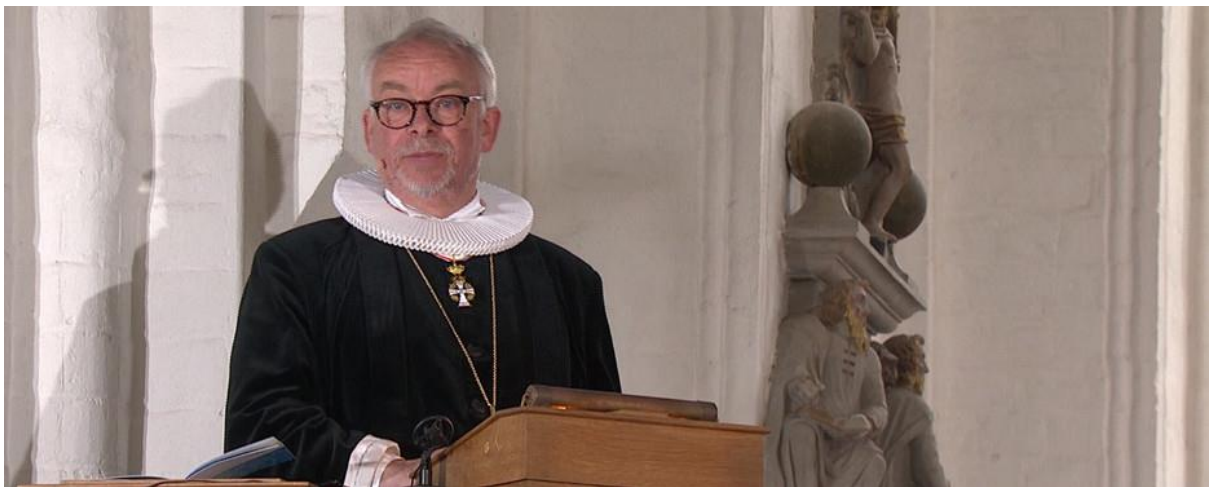




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Whitsunday Sermon, 2017. Cathedral of Haderslev in Commemoration of the Reformation.

Text: John 14:22-31

They never forgot it. Jesus of Nazareth had told them to stand and walk away. They should not stay in this holy place. They should not isolate themselves. They should not close themselves to the world.

They should engage life. They should walk out into it.

On this occasion, they did as he told them. They knew that a new departure was beginning and they felt it in their hearts: In the world, there are some things every human must go through.

A groan passes through creation, a groan that longs for meaning, for grace, for incorruptibility, and for originality.

This longing is born in man and throughout all ages those who have had faith in Christ have believed that this groan was part of the longing of the entire creation.

We have never thought that we had Christ for ourselves. For he is that for which the entire creation longs. He is the glory in which we believe, and in which we wait, and which we already see coming.

We feel there is something happening. This is what we call the Word.

Not the singular word, not a particular sentence but the Word. The Christ Event. That which was, is and will be. That which was at the beginning of all things, that which is, and that which will be at the end of times.

About that Word – the death and resurrection of Christ – Martin Luther writes in a Whitsunday sermon:

“With regards to the word of Moses: In them there is no comfort ... one does not get a clear conscience from that word. On the contrary: The more one feels one lacks the proper dutifulness, the more one fears the wrath of God. But the word of our dear Lord Christ – the holy Gospel which tells us how Christ died for our sins and resurrected for the sake of our righteousness – this word is the grandest and finest treasure. He who has acquired this treasure, says Christ, and holds fast unto it, and would abandon everything before letting this Word be taken from him, he can be certain that his Father loves him.”

The Word – the God Event in Jesus of Nazareth – has hereby broken out upon humanity for it to be experienced, perceived, acquired, and not least for man to be astonished about its splendour.

I am aware that some people think that faith is nothing more than the appropriation of certain doctrinal positions. This world we live in contains so many different systems of belief that faith is but one among many. Slowly but surely one can learn how to parrot one opinion after another. Such an understanding of faith fits well with an understanding of humans as nothing more than a creature which is subject to strict instruction plans and in all other respects behaves rationally and follows whichever course has been laid out beforehand.

But there is something called Spirit – even Holy Spirit – and it blows where it will, it liberates people unto life, unto rebellion, unto resurrection.

And it does so by making it abundantly clear that faith is everything but a checklist of right and wrong. Faith is alive, it is creative, it is effective, and it is unshakeable in its trust in God, and that is why it is boldly cheerful.

Do not for one instant think that it is by mere coincidence that our hymn book opens with the psalm “Congregation of God, Sing unto our Maker in secret” [org.: *Guds menighed syng for vor Skaber i løn*] and has the chorus saying: “so merrily do we play before our Lord”. (And if anyone should feel like dancing I can warmly recommend the Faroese dance steps to this psalm!)

Man is set free to answer to these longings. Life is not a disciplined party programme or a declaration of intent. Life is passion. This is why we celebrate church service, and this is why we play with words, with art, with music. And we carry the church service with us out into the world, and here our playing continues.

Man has always feared the curse, the emptiness, the lack of passion. Man has always wanted to seek truth, originality, justice.

We have always fought the hideous shadows of darkness.

What is moving about the reformation is the passionate desire to return to the sources – to reach into the heart of the event. It is about reacquiring the memory of the real and the original. It is about having the courage to live in conversation and in the Word. We must dare to live with the awareness that it takes courage to listen, to exchange points of view, to be upset about life, to see the other.

It is about daring to hope even if you know your own inclinations. It is about daring to observe man and to really see all of it – not solely the beautiful and comprehensible – but all of it: The darker sides, the misrepresentations, the evil, the egoism.

And not least it is about being gripped with the trust that once something happened which made sure that the world lives with a hope, with a faith, and that it shall live these out in love.

For many years man has been absorbed by ideas – philosophical, political, and economic ideas. May man continue to seek insight. But the Jewish erudite, Martin Buber, is right when he says that we have let ourselves into a solar eclipse.

Something happens when we render God silent. We can become lost in thoughts and ideas and we can fall in love with them but they shall never love us back. The love is not returned.

But something is happening in our world. Once again, we look for the divine mystery. It is as if man in the late modern age is rebelling against the notion that humans are to be understood as a mechanism which only requires the satisfaction of certain needs and bodily functions. We are protesting against being seen solely as the means of a system of production. We do not want to be toppled over by economy and profit. We do not want to be reduced to customers or to look at each other with eyes that are solely focused upon commerce.

However, on our way back towards thinking about God and the religious we must stop in our tracks and acknowledge that religion can become hollow if it is about nothing more than my emotional wellness. And it is equally bad if the passionate preoccupation with God does not lend itself to criticism, afterthought, and questioning. For then it can become cruel fanaticism which in reality contributes with nothing besides a terrible feeling of hate towards humanity – a feeling of hate which can lead to psychic and physical violence.

Some people talk about God in a way that makes you think he rules in lonely majesty without concern for humans – with nothing but contempt and anger towards man. Such talk leads one to believe that a darkening and sadness has overtaken their minds and that it is an idol they are talking about. It is the pathetic demon of their own sadness that they let rule humanity.

Luther knew this sadness and he knew that it wasn't God but his complete contrast. He had his ways to deal with it: Great thoughts, work, and music – all of these could drive away dreariness. Admitted, the old boor once said that when depressing thoughts were haunting his co-reformer, Philip Melancton, he would console himself by doing a bit of astrology. But Luther himself preferred a large beer!

The Holy Spirit settles in us and by hope we are taken aback by the resurrection. Here is a human who is different. Jesus is a prism. In him we meet God and man and now we know something about man that we did not know before. We know that God created man, and now we know that we are created unto Christ. This is why we must talk differently about humankind. Now we know that we must also talk about human decency. Human decency, and humanism are not only kindness and optimism on behalf of humanity.

These years there are some people that seem to believe that “humanism” and “Christianity” are each other's opposites. This is a misconception. Christ faith is born by human decency – by humanism. A Christianity without human decency or humanism becomes barren, sad, and self-righteous. Humanity's dignity is based upon it being created by God unto Christ. We are created with his image in us. This likeness and dignity is incompatible with humans trying to dominate one another, people trying to snout others and put down their neighbour.

If Christ's resurrection is our fulcrum something has happened. The world is another and our faith becomes a singing and dancing protest against injustice in the world.

Sometimes memories fight each other. You should think us Europeans had learned that he who hides behind a wall, behind militarised zones, and watch towers will never gain trust, never experience confidence, kindness, and openness. He will be left to sadness, distrust, and contempt for the other.

We also live with another memory, with a Christ image. We live with the image of he who gives us peace and lets us understand that God does not wear a cold stone face. God loves – not himself, but humanity and all of creation.

The Jewish-American writer, Elie Wiesel, recounts in an account that there are many good reasons to be terrified by the way the world is turning. The 20th century has been the century of horrors of war, totalitarianism, and mass murders. Where was God in all of this? He understands the doubting person who wishes to turn his back to God and humanity. But gently he insists that every human must choose between the smile of the child and the violence of the adult. Every human must choose between hate's horror and trust. Every single one of us must choose whether we wish to inflict our neighbour suffering and degradation or if we wish to facilitate solidarity and hope. Wiesel believes in man in spite of man. He believes in language even if the enemies of brotherliness destroy it. He believes that words can be instruments of understanding instead of instruments of contempt. It is our choice whether we want to use language to curse or to bless and give peace.

Of course, Wiesel believes in the return of the Messiah and somewhat prudently he points out that this event will not make the entire world Jewish. But he is certain that it will be a place of more kindness and more humaneness.

We must always look back and see if we can hear Jesus of Nazareth and if we can understand him. We must fathom, doubt, and believe. We must dare to engage in conversation with eternity and throw ourselves out into lament, prayer, and praise, cries of despair, and cries of jubilation. We must dare to engage in the confidential conversation and the poetry of love. We must long for this transformation which makes us dream about the good nation, about man who does his work and carries his responsibility out of human decency and love for his neighbour. Imagine if we stopped disciplining each other with economy and let responsibility be the only guidance.

Christ is liberation unto hope. He is a bulwark against pessimism and meanness. Where others have only condemnation, he has healing words and help (Garborg). We need his beauty. He is the protest against banal evil. He is the radiant colours, the living words – and the hateful comments of the sycophant drop before Him. He is the praying human, he is the longing one towards whom we long. Shallowness and shrill gossip glances off Him. He is the counter-weight to shallowness, stupidity, and greedy egoism.

By the Holy Spirit he lives. He prays in us, He prays us to dare the transformation. He is the passionate love, He is the origin. He is God's face on earth.

To prove it is impossible. But we would not be here today if not we and our ancestors had experienced it as a liberating truth!

Peter Skov-Jacobsen (transl. Bastian Vaucanson)

Whitsunday July 4th 2017