

Sunday 5 March, 2017 – 6pm service

A sermon preached by Pastor Dr Christian Wolff, Pastor Emeritus of St Thomas Leipzig, on the Fifth Sunday in Lent.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Romans 8:1-11

Alive and free in the Spirit – doomed to death in the flesh. Paul seems all caught up in a dualistic view of mankind and the world – not unlike Martin Luther: on one hand, the enormous impulse of freedom initiated by the Reformation which made him rebel courageously against emperor and pope; on the other hand, the harsh confrontation against anything with an air of “sinful flesh” – be it the peasants, the Turks or Erasmus of Rotterdam. Our reality is torn apart, split into an innocent willing spirit and a corrupt body. Apparently, Paul (and similarly Luther) adheres to a crude condemnation of this mortal world on one hand and a promise of the next world on the other. On the surface, it seems that way. On the surface it looks like Paul's thoughts are apart from this world, from history, from everyday life – in the same way that Martin Luther lived a life quite unfitting for his times in the 16th century. But who among us still thinks in this dichotomy today: law, sin, flesh, death on one side and spirit, freedom, justice, life on the other? However, at first sight this contrast is not all that different from the urge that many people feel today when they escape from the tedious, stressful world of the checkout counter and dive into the forcefully hammering beats at a nightclub to forget the world outside and give in to the yearning for an unrestrained lightness by way of crystal math, ecstasy and alcohol. On the surface, this is the secular form of a divided life, separation of flesh and spirit, world and religion, everyday and Sunday, heaven and earth.

However, Paul's train of thought takes us away from the surface and deep down into our existence, so that we can discover its vastness:

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.

These thoughts, which at first follow the dichotomy of flesh vs. spirit, are meant to sharpen our view for the all-important question: How can we humans persist in this world without simply surrendering and adapting to its laws? How can we stand the tension between functioning under the demands of everyday life, subordinating ourselves to social, familial, professional structures, and the offering of the faith to live in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, so that freedom and justice are ensured for all people? That is to say, how can we anchor our existence *in Christ*, so that the Spirit of God can find its way into our home?

Paul makes it sound relatively easy: just let the spirit of God reside in you and you will swear off any material temptations of the flesh. In real life, however, this turns out to be really hard work, even for Christians. It keeps leading us into desperate situations. For if we follow the path of Jesus Christ, if we try to love our neighbors and our enemies, to care especially for the outcast, the weak and the poor, to be merciful and refrain from violence, to give precedence to non-violence, we get into great conflicts with the laws of life. The contradictions arising from this are often enough held against us as a Church, as Christians. Just think of the conflicts serious Christians in leading positions in politics or economy can get into when they need to make decisions – about arms exports, which are a criminal act from a moral point of view; about deporting asylum seekers to the countries they fled from; about mass layoffs that put employees and their families into desperate situations. How's that for a conflict between the freedom of faith and the boundedness of the flesh?

But we also have to consider another question: What happens if we lose sight of this conflict, if we simply accept the divide between spirit and flesh as a given or deny it? What if we no longer let the Spirit of God reside in us and only rely on ourselves? What if we only think in terms of the flesh, the material, and no longer analyze and question the way we live? Many things go wrong because we no longer deal with the difference between, world and religion, faith and knowledge, politics and morals, spirituality and materialism – and if we do, then it's very superficial and we keep them strictly separated with no touching points. This has a fatal consequence: we submit ourselves entirely to the laws of death and sin, to just eating and drinking, craving and reaping, indulging and competing – until we drop dead. We never account for what our actual calling is. At the same time, however, we suffer the one-dimensionality of the flesh.

Therefore, I would like to call your attention to one thing: It isn't the apostle Paul with his differentiation of flesh and spirit who promotes an inhumane dualism of this world and the next, opposed to pleasures of the body. It is rather those who completely shut out the Spirit of God from their lives – of which we can witness examples every time we Christians lock horns with those who only let the flesh speak anymore. One type of situation where this always becomes really clear is when political opportunism clashes with the basic values of the faith – as has been the case concerning the acceptance of refugees. On one side the many Christians who stand by those who fled from terrorism and war and therefore become involved in a dignified admission of refugees; on the other side politicians who want to seal themselves off from the consequences of their own actions and therefore refugees are imprisoned on islands and in camps.

We shouldn't regret this confrontation. We need the friction between our everyday life and benchmarks of the faith – amongst other things, to reign in our fantasies of omnipotence

and to gain freedom. However: Letting the Spirit of God enter and reside in me or trying to practice an existence *in Christ* through baptism does not come with a guarantee of doing everything right. But if I cease to see my Christian self in the role of the slave, who merely compulsively follows what others demand of him and thereby follows the law of sin, I can experience the freedom and justice gained in faith as a connection between the spirit and the body.

Hopefully, we sense that Paul's ideas are not about what has unfortunately also been deduced from them: opposition to pleasures of the body, damnation of sexuality, denial of a joyful life. No – these are dangerous, bizarre caricatures of Christian existence which, admittedly, have been drawn by the Churches themselves over centuries. Paul rather aims to overcome the deathly structures of our world and make us advocates of aliveness – just as Jesus raised a sign of eternal life amidst a world of death when awakening Lazarus and as the prophet Ezekiel promised that God's breath of life would revive our dried to the bone existence.

Martin Luther noted:

Spirit is everything the Holy Spirit effects in us. Flesh is called what we do without the spirit for ourselves. Therefore all deeds of the Christians such as loving your wife, fathering children, commanding your household, honoring your parents, obeying authority and such are ... fruits of the spirit.

Applied to today, this means: insofar as body cult, sexism, lust for life as well as militarism, capitalism, consumerism present themselves as parts of the deathly structures (no longer being permeated by the Spirit of God), we have to be very critical about them. Indeed, the uninhibited indulgence in drugs, the abandonment of taboos, the leveling of the child and adult worlds, the growing injustices especially in Western societies and the piling up of military potential for violence are an enormous problem. We can no longer reconcile it with essential convictions of faith. This we should recognize as a benefit!

But the most important point in Paul's words is not what ties us to the flesh, the law of sin. It is much rather Paul's intention to pass on the good news that the Spirit of God revives us, sets us free and renews us:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

With these words, some may be reminded of Johann Sebastian Bach's musical rendering in his motet "*Jesu, meine Freude*" (*Jesus, my joy*). In it, Bach chisels this sentence into notes at the end of the motet and lets the choir declaim it: God makes us alive in the midst of the world of death. That is the message which shouldn't embarrass us but reassure us and our love for life. As Christians we belong to the people who believe a difference can be made in life, believe in the return of sinews and flesh; who don't consider themselves beings controlled and chased by anonymous powers but follow their calling in the Spirit of Jesus. Therefore, we Christians have no reason to join in the general lament of the unchangeable facts of life. It is us, after all, who are equipped with the spiritual fuel to constantly restart the

motor of the Reformation, of renewal. This tank will never run empty because we can go back to the sources: ad fontes! So let us witnesses of the resurrected Jesus Christ on this tortured planet stand up for God's creation and set a sign of his message of peace and justice, of respect and mercy for the weak – for example next Sunday on the occasion of the “Walk for justice for refugees” here in Melbourne. That is enough for us to do. Our society depends on this state of soul and mind of the Church. It is not by chance that – despite all trials and tribulations within the institution of the Church – the Christian parishes have always been a reliable partner for the community of all people – this was the case during the Peaceful Revolution of 1989 and it shall also be like that today, in Leipzig and in Melbourne.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen