

Hope

A sermon on John 12: 20-33 by Andrea Klimt, 21 March 2021

Grace be with you - and peace from God our Father.

A farmer regularly goes to the fields with his children and they watch the plants grow and thrive.

One day, shortly after the sowing, they are walking along the fields again:

“What do you see?” the farmer asks. “Nothing,” answer the children.

Some time later they are back on the edge of the field.

“What do you see?” asks the father. “Lots of small stalks, it almost looks like a green meadow,” answer the children.

In the summer the farmer shows them the field again, now full of ears of wheat.

“What do you see now?” he asks. The children describe what they see: “The stalks are strong and bear a lot of grain.” The father says: “It will be a good harvest.”

A year later, in the springtime, they are walking along the fields again. The fields are freshly tilled. “What do you see?”, asks the farmer. The children answer: “Bread for you and for us and for everyone.”

This is hope!

“Bread for you, for me and for all of us.” That is hope!

To see what is not there yet and what is to come!

That is hope: to see the tilled field - just the brown, apparently dead earth - and know what is to come. Life grows and develops hidden under the ground.

That is hope: to already see the bread growing.

To know: in the end there will be a rich harvest.

A rich harvest: many stalks - full ears - many grains - a lot of flour - bread - food for many people.

That is hope: to see food for many, when there is nothing to see at all.

Here in Austria it is time to sow now. The fields are brown. There is nothing to be seen yet. In a few weeks we will see the little green tips of the stalks breaking through the earth like grass. And then you can watch the growth until the harvest. It's Harvest time in Australia or it's already over. There is a rich harvest this year (according to my internet research).

To create a bountiful harvest is not possible. No matter how hard the farmer tries. He can do everything right, but growth can still be unavailable. Growth is given.

In two weeks, we will celebrate Easter. We are still in Lent. We still cannot see Easter, but we know that it is coming because it was and is already here. Easter, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is already a reality. We consciously remember the suffering of Jesus Christ during Lent. Remembering that Jesus suffered, prayed, wept and hoped. Remembering that he would put his hope in God his Father.

Gospel of John chapter 12 verse 24.

“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

Here we have it again: the grain of wheat falling into the earth it will bear fruit. A beautiful picture for Christian hope: The rich harvest.

A picture of life in abundance: everyone gets full and there are still enough seeds for the next sowing.

An image of future and provision and an image that God is the guarantee for this future. Growth is unavailable and can only be given as a gift. God gives growth. God gives us a future.

The grain of wheat that falls into the earth: a beautiful image of the hope that Jesus himself had: He speaks of “a lot of fruit” that arises when the grain of wheat dies.

He speaks of his own death and hopes that God will bring "fruit" out of it. The image of an empty field can be frightening and worrying. What do you see? The farmer asks his children - nothing! Not seeing anything can be scary. Knowing that there is nothing we can do to make something grow can be scary. The attitude that the farmer has is different: trust. He can let go and trust. He could keep the wheat kernels, build storage. That would be enough for a few months, but it won't last. The farmer has to let go, leave the seeds to the earth and then wait. In the meantime, he trusts that God will make it grow. He trusts and he hopes for God's help. The farmer is “in between”. He is between sowing and harvesting and he trusts in God, who gives growth. He hopes for a good harvest.

“In between” – David was also in an “intermediate time”. Psalm 51, which we heard before, is assigned to David during a time in which he was convicted of his grave sin by the prophet Nathan. David asks God for forgiveness in this psalm. He realized his sin. He understands that he has not only sinned against people. Psalm 51: 10-12: “I have sinned against you alone” he prays. He asks God for forgiveness and renewal: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.” With this prayer David is between the realization of his sin and God's forgiveness. He asks God for forgiveness and he hopes for it.

“In between” - the people of Israel are also in an “intermediate time”. Jeremiah reports about it (Jeremiah 31: 31-34). He speaks of a new covenant that God will make. Of a new law that will be written in the heart so that people will obey it. People still suffer from their sin. They suffer far from their country. They suffer because their ancestors broke the covenant with God. But Jeremiah brings new hope to them. God wants to make a new covenant with his people. He will lead them back to their land and they will be able to keep God's commandment and their sins will be forgiven. They can hope for that.

“In between” – Jesus was also “in between”. The Letter to the Hebrews tells about it (Hebrews 5: 5-10). Jesus, although he is called “Son” by God, in tears brought petitions and pleaded before God. He wept and suffered and prayed. He prayed to the One who could save him from death. And God saved him from death. And he, Christ, has become the foundation of our hope. By his death, our sins are forgiven. We have hope through his resurrection. We will live, live with him.

“In between” – Jesus was in an “intermediate time” when he spoke of the dying grain of wheat (John 12, 20-33) and invited his disciples to follow him so that they could also follow him into life. Jesus was in between, when he said his soul was troubled and also asked God to glorify his name. He was in between when God answered him and when Jesus announced his death to his disciples.

The grain of wheat that fell into the ground and died brought much fruit.

But we are still “in between”. Between sowing and harvesting. We still experience what Jesus experienced: fear, sadness, despair. We still experience what David experienced: suffering from his own guilt and sin. We still experience what the people of Israel experienced: suffering from the fault of others, their own ancestors. Suffer from not being “at home”, being a stranger in this world.

In between: Between sowing and harvesting - what happens in the meantime when the seed is hidden and you cannot see it grow? The farmer trusts. He trusts that God gives growth. In the time between sowing and harvesting trust grows, trust grows in him who lets it grow. If the grain of wheat does not fall into the ground and dies: This no shallow hope, no fine painting, no utopia.

The hope of a harvest is a well-founded hope. The farmer has often experienced it that way. He has already sown many times and reaped many times. A rich harvest is not available but the farmer has learned to trust and he has hope in the one who gives life.

This is not a shallow hope: Not a: “Yes, everything will be fine somehow.”

And not a: “If we try hard enough, everything will be fine.”

Christian hope is not a utopia: The grain of wheat will die!

This hope does not ignore suffering, it is consciously addressed: the grain of wheat dies. Jesus is addressing his own suffering and death and at the same time he also opens up the perspective of hope: his death brings fruit.

This word speaks of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This are not nicely spoken words about the process of transformation. Jesus died a lonely and violent death. Christian hope does not ignore human suffering. Christian hope arises precisely in suffering and in the face of suffering: speaking in our symbolic picture: Hidden in the earth. Hope germinates in the midst of suffering.

Christian hope is rooted in suffering that does not remain unanswered. God answers in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which we celebrate at Easter.

We are approaching this resurrection, we believe that God can transform our human suffering into a fulfilled life.

And from the resurrection of Jesus Christ we come, we are rooted in it and it already fills us now. John 12,24 reminds us of this: in the middle of the time of suffering - in the middle of lent - we are surprised by hope.

By a hope that does not ignore suffering.

By a hope that arises and grows in suffering. “Everything will be fine”, these words are often said these days. Yes, we hope so: “Everything will be fine.” But that is not enough:

“Everything is getting better!” This is our hope. When the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ works in our lives, everything will not only be fine, it will be better.

My patience has limits, my perseverance, my love has limits. What I need now, I often cannot take care of it myself. And yet it suddenly appears and surprises me: A gesture that comforts me, a good word from a friend who helps me, a word from the Bible that takes my fear away. Not big miracles, but small signs that give hope.

Everything is getting better! This is our hope! When the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ works in our lives, everything will be better. What I need now, I often cannot take care of it myself. And yet it is suddenly there and surprises me: Compassion for those who suffer.

The willingness of many to go beyond their own limits and do something for the community.
The willingness to forego freedom for example in times of lockdown and physical distancing.

What I cannot do, what I cannot take care of myself, the unavailable, grows in and around me: Consolation - love - understanding. An old bond with friends and the new bond with strangers.

In all of this I not only see people and their possibilities. As a believing Christian I see God, who does not leave us alone in our suffering. I see Christ who is in solidarity with us humans. I see Christ who is there, JUST now IN this situation.

He who has suffered and therefore knows what human suffering is, he is here, next to you and suffering with you and all people who suffer themselves or suffer inconceivable losses. And he who is risen is here with his transforming power and gives us his hope.

And it grows in us: Christ in us. Christ lives in us and in secret he grows in us, his love grows in us. Christ in us, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27).

What do you see?

Maybe nothing yet!

There is well-founded hope and, in the time, when we do not see anything, TRUST grows!

Everything will be okay - maybe - we don't know - but everything will be better - definitely - we can hope for that!

And in between life is growing through Christ in us.

May God bless you and keep you.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15,13)

AMEN