

Thanksgiving Sermon in London October 2th, 2016

2.Timothy 1:7

I pray that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened.

Dear sisters and brothers,

Thanksgiving is one of my favorite events of the year. Especially the songs that we sing in Germany in our services give me a feeling of deep familiarity. So I am very excited to celebrate Thanksgiving with you at this special place. I am very happy today to be here with you and to become acquainted with your tradition.

I spent the first eleven years of my life as a pastor in a rural community and it was one of the highlights of the liturgical year to come together and to decorate the altar with all the proceeds of the soil, with bread and flowers in the evening before the great day. And the people's eyes sparkled when they entered the church in the morning and discovered this splendour. The church was unusually crowded and gratefulness for God's magnificent creation filled the space of the church and the hearts of the people.

Of course, Thanksgiving also always raises the critical question: how do we treat God's creation? How destructive are our human actions and how do we achieve a responsible lifestyle, which lives up to God's commandment for us to look after life on the earth?

To feel gratitude, to express it and to live in its spirit is one of the characteristics Christian way of life. It's the precondition for good and responsible action.

In recent months, one of my impressions, at least when I look at Germany, is that fear is becoming a dominant psychological force. We live in a rich and relatively safe country, yet people's thoughts and actions are driven more and more by anxiety. People fear the unknown, they fear refugees, they fear Islam, they fear terrorism, they fear economic crisis and so on.

This is a terrible development. Fear makes us feel uptight, it shuts down our senses to the perception of the rich life that we have. Above all, this has nothing to do with the spirit that God has given us.

In recent months there have been many crises. The Brexit referendum has shocked us deeply in Germany. It saddened and disappointed us. There were terrorist attacks, there is the rise of the ever stronger inhuman right wing movement, also in Germany. There is the challenge to integrate the many refugees into our society.

In all this a phrase from 2Timothy particularly moved me: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." These words give me solace in troubled times. They raise a question that touched human beings at all times: Can we cope with the changes in our lives or in our society? Where do I stay, where is my identity, where is my home? Many people have the feeling that too many changes happen around them and they are personally afraid to lose touch or even get lost. For this very situation these words were written: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." To deal with one's own worries doesn't mean to get lost in self-pity. Rather, this includes courage and realism: our fears and anxieties will always have a real core. Only because of that they can overwhelm us at times and take people into their possession. Will we lose ourselves in the diversity of people, ethnicities, cultures and religions? Will we succeed in making and keeping the church a good place in this bustling city? Can I live my Christian identity out of an inner freedom is it exhausting itself in drawing boundaries?

The Bible tells of many characters who pour out their unsettled hearts. Often we read about anger, despair, fear and skepticism. I immediately think of drastic psalms that address God with their protest. There are angry prophets who curse their desperate situation and there is a furious Jesus in the temple who walks across tables and benches. There is sadness over failures in life. There are disheartened disciples on Easter Day. In an early version the Gospel of Mark ended with the words: "And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The Bible addresses these feelings openly. They are named, stressed and often addressed to God. But the Bible does not forget about the gratitude, which here as well is strong and the foundation of life.

Our word from Timothy was written during an episode of identity crisis of an – back then - young community.

Fear, suffering and fear play a role, but the focus is a defiant force: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

This parable cannot be said and heard often enough. It rebels and stands up against everything paralyzing. It breaks the misty vapor of fear of foreign infiltration, the threat of terrorism and whatever else surrounds us. "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear ..." This saying opens our eyes for one another, because I have to tell it to someone or it needs to be said to me. This is how it is clearly expressed. But where does the certainty in the Bible come from that fear is not the last invincible fiend before whom we shall all cringe eventually?

Christ is an identity anchor - a guarantee for the gift of life, even beyond death. God has shown in this Jesus Christ,

who He is and how He is. He has shown that He steadfastly means well with mankind. He has defeated death. This way death can't be considered as a cancellation or extinction of life. Since God was in death, it has lost its terrible terror. He has overcome the lack of love with love, the abandonment with his presence. Openness and imagination for life grows, if the anchor gets hold of us and carries us, because in this way fear loses its spike. Fear will no longer repress the joy of our lives and gratitude can gain ground again.

The spirit of fear is a paralysis that increasingly separates us. It takes a community to shake it off and to oppose it. This takes another person to tell me and make me feel: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." It sometimes takes the whole Christian counterbalance of the Easter message: Life that conquered death and "brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." With the assurance that God will not forsake us, no matter where we go astray - I can keep trying to counter anxiety. "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." Let us look together at this force, enjoy the love and grow in prudence. May the Triune God help us and fill our hearts with joy and gratitude for the gift of our life. Amen.