

COME, JUST AS YOU ARE...

Internationaler Gottesdienst der ev. Providenzkirche Heidelberg

15.01.17, Tilman Gerber

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:11-19; NIV)

Good evening!

I hope you have all entered 2017 well! As for me and my family, we have enjoyed "Walking in a Winter Wonderland" very much - finally! At the same time, however, certain germs have not stopped reminding us that this is also the season of running or congested noses, of sore throats or losing appetite, of aching or coughing, of fatigue or even fever.

Now, I don't expect anybody to leave their homes in such a condition. Still, there is a particular advantage of coming here - where the risk of contagion is probably the lowest in Heidelberg. Perhaps you told yourself too: "Why not going to Providence Church? I can keep maximum distance to my neighbour and only get better!"

But then, this service started with the song "Jar of Hearts" by Christina Perri. Now, you may think I am talking about what is a matter of taste. My point, however, is more about what the chorus makes us aware of: There is a "cold from the ice inside your soul" - which means: With increasing distance to your neighbour, it can get worse, actually!

So both our body and soul need healing on a regular basis. And we were informed in the traditional hymn about the ultimate source of well-being: "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation! O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!"

Now, Joachim Neander - who wrote the German original - may seem to us like from another world. If he expressed himself in such a positive way, surely he must have had little or no negative experience at all. Did he ever really suffer from the colds of body and soul, from disease or disappointment? It doesn't look like, does it?

However, the song isn't just dated to any year! I have looked it up: 1680 - believe me or not but this is also when it's author died! And since he was born in 1650, we can easily calculate how young this man still was. Praise to the Lord? That was too early! I don't know about you but under such circumstances, I would expect the hymn to be at least as depressing as the pop song at the beginning!

Of course, one could argue that different moods come with different cultures - depending on when or where a song is written. Or, you could tell me that I shouldn't be surprised by a change from one genre to another. Some people identify themselves more with bright music from Jamaica, other people prefer darker sounds from Scandinavia - for example. There are singers and songwriters, however, who are not 'either-or' but rather 'both-and'! They are like: "Why should I separate, why should I decide between the two?" And apparently, that's often the case in the poetry of the Bible - also in Psalm 104 that we have read together. For this service, however, it was shortened so that it ends with verse 34:

“May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the Lord.” I thought you might be interested in knowing how verse 35 continues which wasn’t printed on the leaflet - yes? Here you are: “But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more.”

Oh, that’s not nice! Yes, but its honest. Even in praise, there is space for different moods. The truth is: If not both glory and brokenness are reflected, any description of creation is incomplete! So in prayer, nothing needs to be censored or hidden. Relating to the all-knowing Creator, you cannot keep things secret anyway. So regardless of how high you have climbed or how low you have sunk, you are invited - like in the other song at the beginning: “Come, *just as you are*, to worship!”

And that’s what I also love about our reading in Luke’s Gospel! Jesus meets a man who was held down, considered double-unclean, double-excluded from ascending to Jerusalem for ‘proper’ worship: On one hand, he was not allowed to enter *the temple* because of his ethnic and religious background as a Samaritan. On the other hand, he was not allowed to enter *the city* anyway because of his leprous skin’s condition. This poor man was double-rejected!

Jesus, however, does not reject him - nor the other 9 men who suffer from the same disease. Interestingly, all the 10 start praying - just according to the mood that they are in. And so they express their mixed feelings, their cries of lament but also of trust (verse 13): “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!” And then we read in the following verse that Jesus was moved to pity indeed and all the 10 were miraculously cleansed!

Now, this is where the story discontinues for the other 9 men. And perhaps, this is also where *we* often break off today: Either, we don’t really believe that our prayers could be answered - and even once they are answered, we have already forgotten our petition and no longer make that connection. Or, we recognise an answer to prayer but the only reaction is that we tick one box on the list of our needs and requests - on the list which is so long that we will always remain dissatisfied.

In contrast, however, Jesus experiences one exception, at least one continuation of the story (verses 15-16): “One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him ” - wow! What a shift in the prayer mood! At once and at last, this distant and marginalised man finds himself in the middle of an intimate, divine encounter! Jerusalem, the temple and the priests look marginal actually - while here, in a nameless village, a nameless villager expresses worship with reckless abandon and praise full of gratitude!

So what made the difference? Apparently, the point of the story isn’t that he’s the only one who *saw he was healed* but that he’s the only one who *came back to the Healer!* And that’s what the story teaches us about how to worship: Come, just as you are - but not to stay as you are! Come, from only desiring a certain *gift* on your wishlist - back to desiring the *giver* personally!

So, as we sing the next song, let us praise God like the man in the story! Let us come to Jesus - back again or for the first time! Through the Holy Spirit, He is present - not just around Ancient Jerusalem or in the 17th century but also tonight! He is here to welcome the imperfect perfectly - so it doesn’t matter in what condition or mood you make the first step! And it doesn’t matter either from which ethnic or religious background you come - He invites all of us with any cold of body or soul to experience warmth and well-being, change and cleansing, grace and gratitude.