

Sermon about 1.John 3, 1-2 on Christmas 2021 in Brussels (IV)

Greeting: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come.

Prayer: Enter now my waiting heart, / Glorious King and Lord most holy. / Dwell in me and ne'er depart, / Though I am but poor and lowly. / Ah, what riches will be mine / When Thou art my guest divine! [Johannes Gottfried Olearius, LSB 350, 1]

Sermon: A *Paradise tree*: Dear friends, normally I like the old churches in Tervuren, where we met from time to time, in the last years always at Christmas, better than this church here. But today I am happy to be here, because here we have a Christmas tree. There is no Christmas tree in the Catholic churches in Tervuren. Do you have a Christmas tree at home? This already very old tradition of putting up an evergreen tree at this time comes originally from Germany. The roots are obscure, probably already in pagan times the Germanic tribes brought fir branches into the houses as a sign of returning life and as protection against evil spirits. But it is disputed whether our Christmas trees today really have anything to do with this. In the Middle Ages, such trees were put up on 24 December, which also did not yet have anything directly to do with Christmas, but with the saints' memorial day on 24 December: on this day the church commemorates Adam and Eve. On this day in the Middle Ages, the story of Adam and Eve was performed in small plays. And for that, of course, a tree of paradise was needed. These were evergreen coniferous trees colourfully decorated with fruit and other things, which were also green in winter. Later, from the 16th century onwards, and in Protestant Alsace, when 24 December became "Christmas Eve", the decorated paradise tree became the Christmas tree.

1. *Imagine a world without God!* Why am I telling you this? I have told you this because there is a direct connection between Adam and Eve and the story of Paradise and Christmas, the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Imagine that God did not exist. Imagine that there is only the visible world with its laws of nature around us. The only goal worth striving for in life would then be to gain knowledge, to make this life on earth as pleasant as possible until inevitable death. What kind of life would that be that runs towards death alone? It would be - to remain in the image - a completely naked life. We would have nothing but our bare life. We would be defenceless, naked. There would be no hope. Life would have nothing around it. Only laws of nature, and they are emotionless; they create no meaning, give no goal. Life would be a search for a little bit of life and knowledge and nothing else. There would be no paradise and there never would have been Paradise. This is exactly what Adam and Eve found after they turned away from God, hid from Him and followed their own standards. There was no paradise anymore. The gates back were closed. They were naked and defenceless. There was nothing left but to try to survive life until death, barely protected with a bit of clothing.

2. *Considering Christmas:* But now, fortunately, it became Christmas. God broke into this world with all his might. It is a miracle. Not to be explained. People have reported that the world was full of angels at that moment. These miraculous figures who indicate to us that at that moment the boundaries of the world and the laws of nature are broken and something new, unthinkable, inexplicable enters the world. Something that transcends our experience and wherefore we have no words for. The only thing that remains for us humans is to approach this intrusion of another power, to see and hear, to feel, to consider.

Martin Luther said about Christmas that one can only contemplate it. It cannot be fully grasped, explained. - What of Christmas can we experience? It is a miracle. It is that the eternal, omnipotent and all-encompassing God makes himself small and is born as a child in time and in the world. The infinite goes into the finite, the limited. This is not to be explained and certainly not to be understood.

Let us also try a contemplation for a moment: This image expresses the Christmas message quite well. We see the earth. Alone, it lies in darkness. The second sphere, the sky is bright. Where the manger stands, the two spheres intersect and there the earth is illuminated by the



heavenly light. It is still the earth, is not yet the pure light of heaven, but it is brighter, warmer and the horizon is expanded upwards. God came into the world at Christmas to make it bright.

In the passage for the sermon for today from the 1st letter of John it says:

Bible: (1) See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. (2) Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

3. Clothed with Life: God breaks into this world again because he loves us as his children. He does not want to leave us alone outside the closed gates of paradise. God wants us to be able to come back to Him. That our nakedness be clothed with life, as the Apostle Paul later describes it (2 Cor 5:1-5). We cannot yet fully understand what all this means for us. But we know it applies, because we know of the hope that faith in Jesus Christ gives us. It is the biggest and best

gift that has ever been given at Christmas. And we have been given it! And that brings us back to the Christmas tree, the tree of paradise. At Christmas it reminds us in its exuberant splendour and with its lights of paradise, which is now accessible again, and the light of heaven, which illuminates the darkness of the world. After all, life is more than we can see and explore and much, much more than just waiting for death. Life is living towards the one who came to us so that we can be in paradise again, in heaven, without worries, without sickness, even without death. Christmas is the feast where the new life began. That is why we celebrate it as a great feast and see and hear the angels: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Blessing: And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.