

Sermon ab. Ecclesiastes 7, 15-18 on Septuagesimae 2025

Blessing: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (Amen.)

Bible: 15 In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. 16 Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? 17 Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? 18 It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.

Sermon: 1. Life is not fair. We all know that. But what sometimes annoys us on a small scale can make us despair on a large scale. Why are those who don't care about justice, the law and morality are usually richer and more successful? And what does God say about what we see as really big and bad sins? Last week at school, we tried to look at this. What does it mean for the rapist and murderer when we say that Jesus Christ died for *all* sins? And whoever believes this will go to heaven?

Then we lose our security and our wisdom. We are unsettled, perhaps even annoyed or angry. How can God allow this! That's not possible! It doesn't go together!

2. This Sunday's topic is God's standard for life. What is just and good in the eyes of God? In the Psalm for this Sunday, Psalm 31, which we prayed at the beginning, a righteous man cries out to God in despair because he is surrounded by evildoers. In the Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah, we heard a kind of answer to this: those who keep to God and follow him, even if this brings short-term disadvantages, will come out well

in the end and not those who do not keep God and his commandments. And this is true even though things look different at the moment and things are better for them and worse for the pious. The gospel of the workers in the vineyard, on the other hand, shows us that things are not always as simple as we think. What is valuable and just in God's eyes does not always seem to be so with us humans. The stern epistle encourages us to follow the example of Jesus Christ, even with fear and trembling. However, this is somewhat mitigated by the hint that it is God himself who grants and enables us the possibility of following him in the first place. And above all, these Sundays before Lent are about following God's path. It is about preparing and equipping ourselves with the things we need in order to survive life until death in such a way that we do not lose the faith that will carry us through to the morning of the resurrection despite challenges.

3. What do we do with it now? What is righteous? Does being righteous in God's eyes always mean having to suffer? And then the wise preacher from the Old Testament intervenes and advises: Don't take everything so seriously! Really now? It always says: Stick to God, follow his word, stand firm, even when things get unpleasant. And then it says: Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?

One interpreter of this biblical passage writes: 'Fate is a rotten traitor. God too? [...] Then you believe: Whoever follows God's instructions is like a fruitful tree by the water. [...] So it says in the first psalm. [...] But in real life it's like this: [...] One has cared for her elderly parents to the point of self-sacrifice and then gets run over by a car. The other brags about her tax dodges and wins a car. The good are doing badly and the bad are doing well. Justice is not

rewarded with luck. On the contrary, there are righteous people who die because of their righteousness.'

4. As always, the Bible is neither unworldly nor world-denying. And, as always, the overall message of the Bible is not extremist, but pro-people and pro-life. St Paul would say: 'You are not *of* the world, but you live *in* the world and *for* the world. God has placed you *in* this life, not *above* it. Remain turned towards the world and the life into which your Lord and God has sent you.

It is not a question of forgetting or overlooking the here and now because you are looking so far away. Those who only ever strive for the distant goal will quickly run into the next lamppost on the road.

5. The preacher calls on us to be relaxed about life and to live pragmatically. It is also about not relying on one's righteousness towards God. That doesn't work anyway. You don't have to do everything yourself. You are not responsible for everything. And above all: God's instruction, his law on how to live properly, is not an end in itself! And this is precisely where I see a problem, especially in more conservative circles of the church. God's commandments are not there so that we can fulfil something for and before God. That is not possible. That is the most fundamental insight of Lutheran theology! God's commandments and laws are there to serve life and us humans. The law is a guideline, not a permanent determinant. I recently used the example of grammar in language in a different context. God's commandment is, so to speak, the grammar of our lives. It underlies everything, it should guide us, but we don't have to constantly reflect on it. What kind of conversations we would have with others if we only ever talked about the functioning of the conversation and never about anything else!

6. But of course, the insight of Ecclesiastes is also not suitable as a categorical imperative for life: Don't take everything so seriously, muddle through like this and it'll be fine. He doesn't say that. He is saying: 'It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.' The Preacher is clear: the foundation of all life is God and my awareness that everything I am and have depends on this God. This awareness is called 'faith'. Anyone who believes this does not have to anxiously scrutinise every letter of the law. But those who believe this still act as much as possible in the way that Jesus exemplified, and of course they also know the good rules of life.

What the preacher lacks is fear. Fear of life and fear of God. He knows that God has different standards of justice that are not always clear to us. And he knows that man is not made for eternity. But he trusts that God knows what he is doing. This attitude is called the fear of God and this is wisdom.

7. Incidentally, in Hebrew the book is called 'Kohelet'. This translates as 'gatherer'. The preacher is a gatherer in difficult times of hardened fronts, social division and threats from outside. He wants to gather people together and overcome their divisions, telling them: 'People, don't be afraid of life. Have God in your heart and mind and then live confidently into the future. It is in God's hands. Where could it be in better hands?' - Let us pray:

Prayer: Merciful Father in heaven, we want to trust you that you are our good fate, and that you have all threads of life in your hands. Help us to keep this faith and lead us to live fearlessly and boldly a Christian way of life loving you and our neighbours as ourselves. This we pray in Jesus' name.

Blessing: The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.