

Sermon about Matthew 17, 1-9 on Transfiguration 2023 in Brussels (V)

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

Bible: 1 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. 3 And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." 5 He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." 8 And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. 9 And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, true light, which lights all people, who come in this world: we ask you, light our hearts with your mercy, that we acknowledge you, the Son of the Living God, as our Saviour and let us stay with you after the darkness of this world in your heavenly grace for ever and ever. (Amen.)

Sermon: *1. Stay, where it is nice:* Dear ones, some of you know or remember Pastor Roland from South Africa who has preached for us digitally two or three times in the past years. In the past, during our studies together, he used to say when he really liked it somewhere and felt comfortable: "Here is good, let's build huts!" - Something similar, not quite so light-hearted, happens to the

disciple and apostle Peter here in our Gospel for today. Together with the two brothers James and John, Jesus had taken him up a mountain. - From the very beginning, mountains have been very special places in biblical terms; places of encounter with God and of clarity. Anyone who has ever been on high mountains, of course preferably with clear weather and a wide view, knows how beautiful it can be on such mountains. You have a wide view, an overview and the abysses of everyday life become very small or perhaps not even visible. Of course you want to stay there, where it is nice.

2. *The full encounter with God:* But it is more than the beautiful view that gives Peter the idea of wanting to stay longer on the top. A real exceptional situation occurs, full of seeing, amazement, thrilling enthusiasm and in the end even physical strain, when one feels the descent in one's knees. Suddenly there on the mountain with Jesus are the great and for the Israelite-Jewish tradition superhumanly important figures Moses and Elijah. They are the most important prophets. And then there is the voice with the message about Jesus and the light that makes Jesus shine as if transformed or transfigured - hence the word and the name of this Sunday: Transfiguration. Everything comes together here: Transformation, revelation with a clear message ("This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.") and theophany, the appearance of the heavenly, divine with the cloud and the figures of Moses and Elijah. More encounter with God is hardly possible. What Moses and Elijah say to Jesus is not said at all. Would it be important? When you obviously have at least one foot in heaven like the three disciples at that moment, it doesn't seem to matter. What more do you want?

3. *Overreaching reality:* How does one react to such phenomena at such a moment? What is "real" at all? That cannot be grasped and certainly not

proven. The theologian and poet Christian Lehnert has shown this impressively: Encounters with the divine are therefore intangible because God himself is never tangible. The question of what is or was "reality" must fail. It is not reality in our human sense, it is an overreached reality. But what is real are the experiences and they show us and let us feel above all that there was "something" - and that changes forever. And the question is, how do I try to handle such an experience? - For Peter, James and John, it is first of all "overbalancing". They are so overwhelmed by the divine revelation that they fall to their knees in fear. And this revelation at the latest makes it clear what everything revolves around here: the person in the middle, Jesus Christ: "(This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." This is the central question: who is this one whom we have followed up here and whom we now see in a different light? Obviously - as the appearances around show - it is the Redeemer and divine Saviour, Lord of the world and Lord of time.

4. God with us against the distress: Peter then tries to handle the whole thing in such a way that he wants to build huts - he wants to hold on to the situation, conserve it, stay there. Because he feels: now, at this moment, everything is perfect. There are finally no more questions, no more doubts, nothing to discuss. And he quickly realises: at the second glance, everything is over again. "And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only." - At first Peter seems to make a fool of himself here, with his three huts, which seem to completely miss the point. But the Greek word used here is "szänä" - tent. Tents are not a permanent place, they protect you from the weather but at the same time let in the light, they are airy, light, can be taken down quickly and you can take them with you to the next place. Like the tabernacle, the first sanctuary of the people of Israel. The term "tent" is also used for this. It is the tent of the wandering through the desert, where the Ark of the Covenant is

kept, where God is present and goes along. The tent of the tabernacle stands for the God who is present. - What Peter wants to do here is no different than when we stand on a high mountain and are overwhelmed by the view and the light and shadow on the vast landscape and quickly pull out the smartphone to take a selfie. Surely this unique moment must be captured! - And it can't. The photo later will not convey half the atmosphere that we felt at that moment. The situation is unique. - And we notice how we stop smiling at Peter. Peter's desire for tents is an expression of need! Lord, let us stay here, not go back down into the valley, into everyday life, into problems! Please, Lord, stay and keep it that way! But such a top experience cannot be held on to, God cannot be captured in a tent. What remains is the sting in the heart when we look at an old photo, when the beloved partner was still alive, the child who had been moved out was still sitting cutely on your arm, you were still young and fit, in a beautiful place that you know you will no longer visit anymore.

5. *We with us through the distress:* How susceptible we are to always doing just that: holding on at all costs because the unknown ahead scares us. We build not only tents, but huts, walls, fortresses around ourselves, find excuses without end and thus remain standing, unable to move forward. How many dogmas in theology also want to do just that: putting God in a tent that can be safely disposed of. There you can be sure that he is there where you want to be. But Jesus shakes his head. God does not fit into a small tent, into liturgical formulas and iron dogmas. Jesus shakes his head. "You still don't get it. Let's go! You have to move. Off the mountain and into life. Running, training, becoming strong in the life of the Gospel - that will be useful for what is to come. Sitting in the tent is of no use to anyone." Jesus takes them down from the mountain again. This way is exhausting and it leads straight to the road of

suffering, to serving for the weak and needy, to the Passion and the Cross. But this is the path towards Easter that now lies before us.

6. Strengthening for everyday life, not everyday life itself: So what is it all about? It is about the moment of experiencing that what we believe in is real, real - yes, much more than that. This Lord Jesus Christ who calls us to follow him is even greater than our little reality. You have to experience that! In fulfilling worship, scripture reading, song, prayer, meditation, however that looks personally. It has to be experienced and lived through. It gives us an inkling and hope, meaning and strength for what comes after: the descent into everyday life, passing time and even death. But precisely towards Easter and resurrection! These moments we need are strengthening for everyday life, not everyday life itself. Look for them, celebrate them by following the permanent invitation of your Lord! And then go into your life in the name of Christ!

7. Only eyes for Jesus: The Christmas and Epiphany season is now coming to an end. We probably don't feel much of it anymore. The daily routine of the new year has long since begun, the candles and stars have been put away. The light is fading. Now the Passion lies before us. But this Sunday just makes it clear to us: "Rise, and have no fear." Jesus did not just "hit" the earth falling down from heaven at Christmas, but he comes and walks with us - uphill and especially downhill he is with us and wants to master our lives together with us. I wish that we too, like the disciples, will only have eyes for Jesus in the end and that the light of heaven will shine in our hearts through every dark valley of life.

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