

Sermon about Hebrews 5, 7-9 on Judica 2023 in Brussels (V)

Greeting: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Bible: 7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9 And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

Prayer: Merciful father, bless your word to us. In Jesus name we pray. (Amen.)

Sermon: 1. *Obedience?*: In the background of this Sunday's readings and even in the foreground of the Epistle, which is our word for the sermon, it is about obedience, and by this, in the sense of the Sunday, it means above all submission. Obedience - that is such a thing. We Germans in particular have our difficulties with it. After past experience, we have learned to be extremely critical of obedience and, in case of doubt, to disobey rather than to do a high duty. Resistance still sounds much better to German ears today. We decorate our streets, schools and barracks precisely with those who resisted and refused obedience. And all parents also know how difficult obedience can be. - Now it is said that *even Jesus* learned obedience and did important things with it. That sounds strange. What does he still have to learn? And anyway, what kind of obedience is it? And to whom is he obedient?

2. *What means to be obedient?*: Obviously, obedience is something that can and perhaps must be learned. Obedience means to obey someone else. The original meaning of the word in Greek, also the corresponding word in the Hebrew Old Testament and also in most Germanic languages, has the basic

meaning of *listening* to someone what he says. (The English word comes from Latin.) To listen carefully to what he needs or wants. And then also to "follow" him. The Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus learned obedience through his suffering. Flippantly, we would say today: He learned it the hard way. Before that, this kind of obedience was not expected of him, because he is the Son, the Son of God. Thus God himself. Who was God supposed to be obedient to?

3. Obedience as duty: I read about an interesting incident on this topic. A Protestant theologian was invited to a speech by a Benedictine abbot about „obedience“ and accepted this invitation only reluctantly. To him, the monastic concept of "command and obedience" seemed out of date and already on the way he formulated "Protestant" counter-arguments of "freedom, contradiction and resistance". But then he was very surprised when the abbot told him how difficult it was for him to be obedient as a novice and still as an adult monk. But he was much more surprised when he confessed how difficult it is for him to be obedient as an abbot. He reported: ""Obedience as an abbot is sixteen times more difficult for me than obedience as a monk."" Sixteen times harder? "The monks," he said, "obey one abbot, but as abbot I have to obey sixteen monks in my monastery."" How is this to be understood? In the spirit of the Rule of Saint Benedict: ""The monks should outdo each other in mutual obedience."" No hierarchy. No orders. Sixteen men are supposed to obey each other? I imagine how difficult it is for the abbot to obey sixteen different personalities. Sixteen people have different needs, different desires. Who should he obey? Who should he not? He had to learn what was really necessary, what individuals really needed. He had to decipher demands that were put forward. What serves the community? What needs to be done so that no one gets a raw deal? There are mutual contradictions, oppositions, resistances. Whoever wants to lead here must obey and contradict, yield and resist. This, then, is the

obedience that people need in order to lead without ruling." Obedience is the prerequisite and epitome of good service to others. It is a very different kind of obedience from what I spoke about at the beginning. It is not about ruling and being ruled. In his earthly life, our Lord and God in Jesus Christ enters into our lives with all the consequences and thus learns what we need, what we suffer from, what brings us down. He listens to our pleas and our cries, he weeps our tears, he dies our death on the cross and thus becomes obedient to life. Man's first and greatest servant. It is basically exactly the opposite of the request of the brothers John and James from the Gospel, who want to sit with Jesus at the very top of the rulers' seats. This is exemplified once again in our weekly verse from the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 20:28): "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

4. *The Lord becomes servant:* What may sound complicated here in Hebrews is the great, paradoxical and unique message of the great God who exchanges his life for that of us humans. He goes all the way down on his knees to serve us because and by learning what we need. It is Jesus Christ, the Lord, who puts on his apron and kneels before his disciples to wash their feet. Here the conditions are reversed that began with the Incarnation at Christmas. Martin Luther called this the "joyful change" and expressed it especially in his Christmas carols. For this Gospel is already echoed there. And that is why we are about to sing with Nicholas Herman in Christmas clarity: "He serves that I a lord may be; a great exchange indeed!"

5. *God learns and changes His mind:* This is amazing! Scripture presents us a God who descends to our miserable level of a life that, from conception, inevitably approaches death. He enters into a world without peace and suffering. And he listens carefully, listens to what we need. Looks. And follows

to save us. God learns! And God changes his mind! Folks, think what this means and what horizons this opens for us! God is not sitting far away and uninterested behind a cloud. He is there, listening to you and also learning from your fate. Our suffering is his textbook. And just as he listened to Abraham's requests at Sodom and Gomorrah, just as he allowed himself to be dissuaded from his plans for Abraham and Isaac because *of Abraham's obedience*, just as he allowed himself to be changed by Moses' intercession for the people and the request for forgiveness of the inhabitants of Nineveh, just as Jesus allows himself to be persuaded by the Phoenician woman who asks for her child, so our heavenly Father shows mercy here in the experience of the suffering of Jesus Christ. This is the paradox of the cross. God reverses the circumstances. - Despite all the horror, it is good to remain in conversation with God. There is hope, because God is changeable and also has the power to bring salvation. For he is stronger than death. Jesus Christ becomes the author of salvation because he listens to what we need.

6. ...because God obeys Jesus: Why does the Father help out of death? Because he too listens to Jesus. God, the Father, also learns obedience here at the end. He listens to the cries and pleas of His dear Son and destroys death with His life *because He can*. - This salvation is for all who listen to Jesus, who in turn are obedient to Him, as Hebrews says. *It is for us*.

7. Stepping out of the role: I began by saying that obedience is often criticised these days. But here we are dealing with a different obedience, as we have seen. Precisely this obedience, which our Lord Jesus Christ shows in an exemplary way, is a service that also carries resistance in case of need. In Jesus' case, it was resistance to hell, death and the devil. - This is a task of obedience too great for us. We can only look at it and praise and thank God for it. But it is

also a good example for us. In Jesus we see how good it is that God "steps out of the role" and takes the position of the other person. In this way, he sees and feels and learns what the other person needs. What would our world look like if we also would do this consistently? If the government listened to the poor, if teachers listened to their students, parents listened to their children, company bosses listened to their employees about what they need. And then, on this basis, carry out their leadership task for the best. In the end, everyone would have won, and without oppressive rule and orders. Obedience: that means to listen carefully, to look, to sharpen the senses, to follow, to act. That is what Jesus did for you and me. Thanks be to God!

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