

Sermon about Romans 15, 4-13 on 3rd Advent 2024 in Antwerp + Brussels

Blessing: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come. (Amen.)

Sermon:

I.

‘All's well that ends well’, as the saying goes. Anyone who crosses the finish line forget the hardships of the distance travelled. A happy ending is a great victory, an indescribable happiness. We envy the athletes - the few who make it to the podium and can hardly believe it themselves. If only it were the same for us in real life! If only I was just as relieved and happy at the end. But on the way there, I don't know where my life is heading. Will it end well for me? In what shape will I be in? If the last words we exchange with our loved ones will be good words, true words, spoken words, spoken from an unfeigned heart - then it is good. But it is not certain that we will be able to do this together. If the last thing I think and feel is thanks, then it's good. If the last thing that stirs in me is a feeling of hope for my children and grandchildren, for the generations that remain and for those who are yet to come - then it will be a good end for me. But that is anything but a foregone conclusion. And if I think and pray what Jesus prayed in his dying hour, then it will be a blessed end. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. Will it be like this? I do not know.

II.

Coming to an end needs to be learnt. Nevertheless, it is more than just a well-crafted result. A happy ending is a gift. ‘All's well that ends well, sounds normal and easy, like an equation that works out. If you've done the maths right, it will work out in the end. But a good life and even more so a good

death are anything but self-evident. Wise counsellors therefore speak of the 'art of ending', in the Middle Ages it was the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying. Ovid was a word artist in the days of the emperors in Rome. He wrote about love. He wrote a mythical history of the world in monumental poetry. Ovid was a giant among the artists of human history. The history of mankind. He knew from his own experience that life is a risk. A good beginning can be followed by a bad end. The great ancient poet was sent away from Rome by Emperor Augustus into exile. Ovid died in solitude. 'I have perished of my talent', he wrote at the end. From his pen, the saying 'All's well that ends well' sounds very different and much more sophisticated. 'The end crowns the work.' But even the great artist was not granted a crowning finale.

III.

You can practise an art. It requires intuition and feeling. I also need examples and inspiration. That's why I look in the Bible. What art of quitting can I find there? Each of the scriptures in the New Testament has a special ending. The gospels end in different ways. Mark ends with the horror of the resurrection and Matthew with the doubt of the resurrection. The final sections in the letters are also different. The 1. Thessalonians was probably the first and oldest letter of Paul. It ends with exhortations and greetings, as do a few other of his writings. Christians should lead a good life. We conclude our church services in a similar way: 'Go in the peace of the Lord. But the letter to the Romans ends a little differently.

IV.

The letter to the Christians in Rome is probably Paul's most important work. He wrote this letter at a turning point in his life. The apostle had long far-reaching travel plans. Let's go West! Now it was time to set off. Off to Spain!

To get there he wanted to make a stopover in Rome. Caput mundi, the capital of the world, was to be his next base. To this end, Paul sent a kind of friend request to the Jesus believers there. In this way, the letter to the Romans became an interim balance sheet. What Paul wrote about faith, about grace, about the new life of the baptised became a legacy for Christianity. To this day, the letter to the Romans is a compass, an intellectual and spiritual source of strength for faith. Although it was not his first letter, but one of his last, the letter to the Romans has been placed at the beginning of the New Testament letters. A foundational work. 'Take and read', the church father Augustine heard from a children's chant. He picked up the letter to the Romans and experienced the turning point of his life.

V.

We are looking for an 'art of ending' and look into the legacy of the apostle. How does this letter end? On the last two pages Paul comes to the end. He explains his travel plans. He sends his greetings to some members of the church whom he had already met elsewhere. He didn't want to be Mr Nobody knock on their door. So far, so similar to his earlier letters. But there is a section, a few verses in chapter 15, in which where I can already hear the final music swelling mightily. In the church service, this is the moment in the sermon when the organist stands up and goes back to the organ bench because he realises: now comes the end. It becomes solemn once again. A goal lights up. A conclusion is drawn. Admonitions. In a moment comes the Amen. Shortly afterwards: 'Go in the peace of the Lord.'

(Reading of the sermon text: Romans 15: 4-13)

4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant

you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 8 For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, 9 and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." 10 And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." 11 And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." 12 And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." 13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

VI.

Paul writes last words. And he is writing about hope. – Hope, a great word which comes out of fashion nowadays. If we watch TV, the news, listening to protesters and scientists, our situation is rather hopeless. Everything is ending – but it is obviously not a good ending. If you take a closer look, it seems that many people have long since given up on life. It is no longer about living, but only about surviving. Something is missing! Yes, hope is missing. Because hope is what makes life possible. Hope is what makes life meaningful. Because hope opens up the future before us. Hope should not be confused with optimism. Optimism is an inner attitude, a way of looking at life and not always expecting the worst. Optimism can be fuelled by experience. Hope is different. Hope is much more than just an attitude.

VII.

Hope is something that can be found outside of me. The Lutheran theologians speak here in Latin with the words 'extra nos' - outside of us. Hope comes to me. That alone is comforting, because I am not thrown back on myself, condemned to having to produce something myself. But hope can be acquired, trained. To paraphrase St Paul: I can read hope and have it read to me, I can hear hope and share it with others by passing it on. This also means that hope is a matter of community. It's hard to hope alone in the long run. Hope is the lived practice of community, exactly what we should cultivate and nurture here.

VIII.

But where can I read about hope and hear about hope? In the ancient scriptures that tell us about God. We hear about hope as early as the prophets, as Paul writes. Paul quotes Isaiah here as an example, and also the Psalms and the Tora. And also Zechariah, whom we heard about in the Gospel is such a witness of hope. It is about our end being a good one. It is about the fact that God, our Father in heaven, is not resigned to the fact that we have to fight for survival. It is about the fulfilment of justice for all. It is about peace between people, but above all between God and you and God and me.

IX.

We hear about this hope especially now during Advent. Because the greatest story of hope is our Lord Jesus Christ, who came into our world to show how faithful God is and on what a strong foundation this, our hope, rests. Jesus Christ is the one who says to us: Look, I am already bringing the beginning of fulfilment. From now on, the kingdom of God will rise among you. From now on, there is even more reason to hope than there was before.

I will show you what God's love means. I will show you what it is like in the kingdom of God. And I will give you the invitation cards. No one should be left outside. Come here, everyone. Your hope will be fulfilled. Jesus is the guarantee, that this hope is not an empty wrapping.

X.

With the Third Advent, we begin the so-called 'High Advent'. The time of hope is now. Let us also share this hope among ourselves and in the world. If we speak to one another in such a way that the hope of justice and peace and freedom and redemption through and with God shines forth, then we have good words for one another. And then our last words will also be good words, because they are full of hope.

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