

## **Sermon about Romans 1, 16-17 and the readings of the Third to Last Sunday of the Church Year 2024 in Antwerp and Brussels**

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

**Sermon: 1.:** Dear friends, what drives your Christian faith? What do you think is the core of the Christian, and hopefully also the church's, message? I also asked my Year 11 pupils this question last week. From their point of view, the meaning and purpose of the church and the central aspect of the Christian faith is the promotion of 'good and social coexistence in society without marginalisation'.

Of course, this is one aspect of the church's proclamation and mission to work in this way in state and society. But it can hardly be the central point; of course, it is a logical consequence of what we believe - or at least what the church should proclaim as the core of its faith.

**2.:** Today we celebrate the third-last Sunday of the church year, which marks the beginning of the last part of the church year that deals with the 'last things': with the end of our own lives, but also with the end of the world and the 'return of Christ for the Last Judgement', as we profess in our confession of faith in the Creed. This season then culminates on Sunday of Fulfilment, when we focus on the world to come and life after death.

The third-last Sunday of the church year sets the tone with the question of the Last Judgement. This may sound very strange to us modern ears, perhaps completely incomprehensible or absurd. I suspect that my pupils will not be able to relate to it personally. But it really is the core of the biblical, Christian message: this world of ours is a first creation, temporary, destined to come to an end one day. And life teaches us - usually very painfully - that we humans

also come to an end. Even if we often ignore death, it always catches up with us. And then we cannot avoid the question: What comes after that?

**3.:** The Bible tells us about what awaits us in different ways. In the prophets, such as today in the book of the prophet Micah, we read that at the beginning all the nations of the earth, all people, will finally recognise that God is Lord. All will come and bow before Him. In the New Testament in particular, this realisation is given a pastoral and personal addition: every person will also stand before God *personally*. Everyone will be seen, everyone will be recognised, everyone will be listened to. Then, on the one hand, it will be about personal life and personal confession of Jesus Christ and, on the other, about bringing justice, peace, forgiveness and redemption into the world of each individual. In this judgement before God, the suffering creature is given redress and justice. This is what we as Christians hope for, for example with the Apostle Paul, as we heard in today's Epistle reading.

**4. :** Let's come back to my pupils and the question of what the core of our faith is now. If we had asked Martin Luther and the people of his time this question a good 500 years ago, the answer would have been completely different. Martin Luther would probably have said something like, follow God's words and laws as precisely and faithfully as possible in order to have at least a small chance of being in purgatory for as short a time as possible. This, he would have said, would hopefully have done enough good to get us to heaven. The bottom line is that the motivation behind this belief could simply be described as 'fear'. Of course, people used to 'know' that there was life after death. The question was, how and where will I be then? Through various developments in church history, however, thinking had now developed in such a way that people believed they could buy their way out of damnation and earn heaven with God by either living as sinless a life as possible or by making good amends for sins committed.

This inevitably drove self-reflective people like Martin Luther to despair. Those who knew God's commandments and reflected on their own lives could discover nothing but failure in them. And so God becomes a terrifying figure. Do you think you have a chance of going to heaven if your life is the only thing that matters? I think at least a slight doubt would be appropriate.

**5.** : Today is Martin Luther's birthday. He would have been 541 years old today. This is another reason to reflect on his insight against the background of this Sunday. Martin Luther tried to please God as much as possible with his way of life. He became a monk in order to dedicate his entire life to this goal. Through his professional Bible study, he came across the verses in Romans (Romans 1:16-17): 'The gospel [...] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For therein is revealed the righteousness that is before God, which is by faith in faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.' - Martin Luther recognised and confessed the biblical truth that it cannot mean: you must *do first* and *then* perhaps God will take you to heaven, but: *Because* you believe in Jesus Christ, recognise him as Lord and God, God will therefore also leave you at Jesus' side in heaven. This is the central aspect of Lutheran theology. That is why we are the Lutheran Church, because we believe and confess the unconditional acceptance of sinful human beings, solely by faith in Jesus Christ, solely by God's grace.

**6.** This opens up completely new perspectives on life. Not least because you are freed from your self-centredness. You can take a relaxed view of your fellow human beings because you yourself are safe, redeemed and loved. The final judgement need not frighten us. It will be a sigh of relief for us. As Lutherans, we know and confess that we can do nothing of ourselves to be absolutely sufficient for God. We are dependent on God for everything. But through faith in Jesus

Christ, we are given righteousness. That is the centrepiece of the Lutheran confession.

**7. Speaking of confession:** there is another Martin to mention: St Martin, Bishop of Tours. He was buried on 11 November 397 after dying a few days earlier at the age of 81 while travelling through his diocese and being led home with lanterns by the people. Martin Luther is named after him, because in his time people were often given the name of the saint of the day on which they were baptised. Martin of Tours was also an exemplary confessor of the Christian faith in word and deed, at a time when the people of Europe were often still pagans and the church had not yet clarified many theological issues. He preached the gospel to the ordinary people in his area, cared for the poor and stood up in the church as a protector of the true faith against false teachings. Alongside Martin Luther and many others, he too can be a role model and an incentive for us to follow this path. We are certain that this path of faith will lead us to heaven.

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